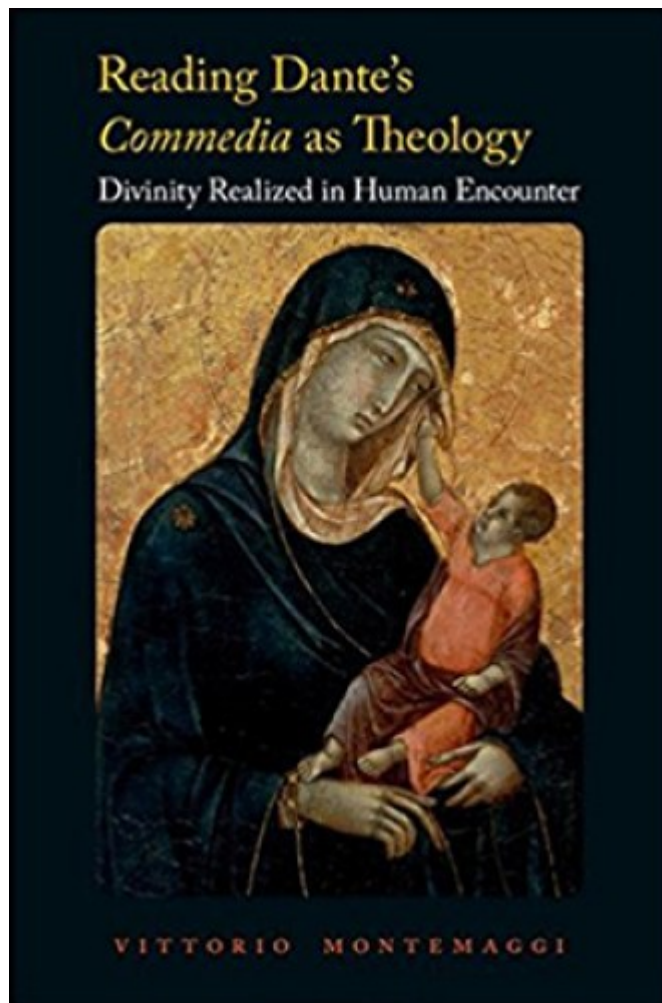


In Dante, love is stronger than hell

Vittorio Montemaggi shows how important it is not to get stuck in the inferno.

by [Paul J. Contino](#) in the [March 14, 2018](#) issue

In Review



Reading Dante's Commedia as Theology

Divinity Realized in Human Encounter

By Vittorio Montemaggi
Oxford University Press

Ask a friend to free-associate: “When I say ‘Dante,’ what is the first word that comes into your head?” “Inferno!” your friend responds. I have often tried this, and I lament this invariable response. The associated word should be *love*. For as Vittorio Montemaggi amply demonstrates, it’s not hopeless pain that reverberates throughout *The Divine Comedy*, but trinitarian love—a love that moves the sun, the stars, and every human heart animated by justice and kindness.

Montemaggi’s study shows how *The Divine Comedy* offers a potentially transformative encounter with a loving poet. Like Dante himself—the persevering pilgrim portrayed in the poem—receptive readers may find themselves reoriented, drawn to the hidden ground of love, and thus better poised to help others along the way to our common goal, communal beatitude.

In the poem’s first canto, Dante learns that he can’t reach God by himself. He needs the help of others to guide him to our common *telos*. When heavenly mediators are moved by divine love to summon Virgil, the Roman poet guides Dante down into hell and up Mount Purgatory. Dante, learning to see sin for what it is, discovers that any attempt to “possess or control” God will fail. In hell, he meets souls like Ulysses, who presumptuously sought autonomous apotheosis, cut himself off from all human ties, and destroyed himself in the process.

At this point you may say: “Look, I’ve tried reading Dante but was put off by his *own* presumption! Who does he think he is, writing a fiction in which he places his enemies (and some of his friends) into an interminable torture chamber?” I’ve asked a similar question of *Inferno*. But Montemaggi helps to remove the stumbling block.

What if, in these infernal cantos, Dante is inviting readers to discern the poet’s own confession of sinful, self-righteous judgment? What if, as Montemaggi suggests, “Dante wish[es] us to call into question his own very human attempt at playing God in his poem” and is entreating readers to pray for him as we pray for others?

This interpretation opens a passage through hell as gracefully as the angel unlocks the gates of Dis in Canto 9. In Montemaggi’s reading, “being in hell does not necessarily mean being separated from God for eternity.” Thus, we are right to hope for Virgil’s salvation, even though he has come from Limbo. After all, Beatrice promises to pray for Virgil. Moreover, Virgil progresses spiritually as he guides

Dante.

Montemaggi's reading, in which love is stronger than hell, edges Dante closer to other Christian writers who have imagined hell with a loophole. I think of Dostoevsky's Father Zosima in *The Brothers Karamazov*, who prays for those who have died by suicide, or C. S. Lewis's benevolent bus driver in *The Great Divorce*.

That said, I wish Montemaggi had extended his attention more fully to other moving encounters in *Inferno*: Dante's fainting response to Francesca's sad story of adulterous love; his affectionate reunion with his old teacher Brunetto Latini; his icy response to the treacherous, including Ugolino, who witnessed his innocent sons starve to death.

In contrast, Montemaggi's fully orbed readings of passages in *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* are luminous reminders that no teacher of Dante should ever leave the students in hell. You don't have to be Catholic to appreciate *Purgatorio* as an allegory of every Christian's call to repentance in this life. In the first terrace of Purgatory, those purging the sin of pride pray the Pater Noster but add words. Here, Montemaggi ingeniously likens Dante to a medieval illuminator of manuscripts, whose "rewriting of the *Our Father* can thus be seen as both a conscious gesture of confidence in his own artistic talent and as gesture of dispossession of the presumption . . . to think of one's art as having ultimate value apart from the Word of God." The virtues of magnanimity and humility foster each other.

In *Paradiso*, souls shine at their brightest—even as each humbly participates in the loving life of the communal Trinity. The Eagle of Justice, for example, composed of numerous souls, speaks with "a perfect coincidence of singular and plural." Dante's examination in the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love—by, respectively, Peter, James, and John (the patron saints of Dante's three sons)—models the way learning best transpires through collaboration. And in the final canto, Mary (to whom Dante prays each morning and evening and whose love impels his pilgrimage) emerges as "the most perfect human example of the embodiment of the truth encountered in Christ." Dante's final vision is of the incarnation, "human embodiment eternally inscribed in the life of the Trinity," which propels the accomplishment of his own great deed of love: composing the *Commedia* for the benefit of his readers and fellow pilgrims.

Montemaggi models how the academic vocation can be marked by love. Unlike those who feel compelled to overcome past scholarship in the ambition to "break

new ground,” he refuses to claim originality “in a competitive sense.” Like Dante, Montemaggi is a careful scholar who admits vulnerability and expresses gratitude to the scholarly community that has nurtured him. He writes autobiographically, with a remarkably clear memory, and acknowledges many guides, from Rowan Williams and Denys Turner to his undergraduate students at Notre Dame. Each is named, and together they compose a kind of scholarly communion of saints who have blazed for him a scholarly and spiritual path. Thus, Montemaggi shows us—just as Dante does—how the life of theologian and disciple are integrally related.