
Blake and Exhibitions, 2021

BY LUISA CALÈ

Luisa Calè (l.cale@bbk.ac.uk), Birkbeck, University of London, works on practices of reading, viewing, and collecting in the Romantic period. Her publications include *Fuseli's Milton Gallery: "Turning Readers into Spectators"*; co-edited volumes on *Dante on View: The Reception of Dante in the Visual and Performing Arts and Illustrations, Optics and Objects in Nineteenth-Century Literary and Visual Cultures*; and special issues on "The Disorder of Things" (*Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 2011), "The Nineteenth-Century Digital Archive" (*19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 2015), "Literature and Sculpture at the *Fin de Siècle*" (*Word and Image*, 2018), and "Sibylline Leaves" (*Studies in Romanticism*, 2020). Her current project, entitled *The Book Unbound*, explores practices of collecting and dismantling the book, with chapters on Walpole, Blake, and Dickens. She is the exhibitions editor for *Blake*.

1 DISPLAYS of Blake in 2021 were still affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, with many institutions closed, staff working from home, and moratoria on loans. Some institutions had their own Blakes on view, such as *God Judging Adam* at the Metropolitan Museum from October 2020 to mid-January 2021 and a plate from *America a Prophecy* at the Morgan Library and Museum in New York. William Blake: Visionary, building on the Tate retrospective of 2019–20 and planned by the Getty Museum in Los Angeles for 2020, is now scheduled for late 2023.

2 The most significant event in the visual reception of Blake in 2021 was the seventh centenary of the death of the medieval Italian poet Dante Alighieri, to whom Blake devoted 102 watercolors during the last years of his life. Although there were plans to show some of them, such as the intended loan of Melbourne Dantes to the unfortunately canceled Prado exhibition in Madrid, the watercolors were not among the works featured in the main Dante exhibitions of 2021. For conservation reasons, the Ashmolean Museum could not include watercolors from its own collection in Dante: The Invention of Celebrity, since they had been on

view too recently at the Tate retrospective. Instead, it chose to showcase Blake's engraving of "The Circle of the Lustful: Francesca da Rimini." Of the eighteen heads of poets that Blake painted for the library of his patron William Hayley at Felpham in Sussex, Homer and Dryden have been on display at Manchester Art Gallery since 2006 to capture Blake and Hayley's cosmopolitan canon, while the Dante portrait traveled to the Inferno exhibition at the Scuderie del Quirinale in Rome.

3 Experimentation with digital facsimiles was a remarkable feature in 2021. *The Circle of the Lustful* is at the center of the contemporary artist Melanie Smith's Blakean tableau vivant and two-channel video work *Vortex*, while other Blake works are the basis for her pigment-on-wood *Absent Leading Role Exercises*. Another Dante centenary exhibition in Rome, La biblioteca di Dante at the Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, included reproductions of some of Blake's Dante watercolors within a digital iconography room with camera-obscura style multisensorial projection holoboxes.

13 April–10 July 2021

Parafin Gallery, London

Melanie Smith, *Leave It to the Amateurs*

The title of the exhibition captures a tableau vivant by Mexico-based British artist Melanie Smith. Smith's encounter with Blake was shaped by the scholarship of Kathleen Raine and William Vaughan, the *Blake Archive*, and "the Topographic Sublime by Iain Sinclair, which I think, even without images conjures up brilliantly how Blake sucks us into seeing pain, anguish, urban paranoia"¹

This tableau vivant, entitled *Vortex*, was commissioned by MUAC, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Mexico City, and the Museo Amparo in Puebla. The live action was performed at MUAC, directed from the Museo Amparo, and projected simultaneously in both locations from May to October 2019. Smith worked with a choreographer, six cameramen, and twenty-eight dancers invited to participate in an unrehearsed (hence "amateur") performance, in which they were called to take a random place on a swirling serpentine structure inspired by *The Circle of the Lustful*, Blake's response to *Inferno V* in Dante's *Commedia*. Blake's vortex was translated into a choreography captured by six security cameras and projected on a computer screen 875

1. Communication with the artist. I am grateful to Celia Higson at Parafin Gallery for conveying my questions and Smith's responses via e-mail in June 2021.



View of the *Vortex* installation. Photos of this exhibition are reproduced by permission of Parafin Gallery, London. Images: Peter Mallet.

meters away. Blake acts as “a mentor of cobalt blue ... conjuring a deranged cosmology of the future perfect tense, as visible as incorporeal beings on CCTV monitors.”² Smith’s tableau vivant animates Blake’s blue palette to produce a carefully constructed “symmetrical, multi-source illusion,” a “hallucination” that alludes to “bisexual lighting,” “the simultaneous use of blue, pink, and purple light—the colors

2. Melanie Smith, “Leave It to the Amateurs,” *Melanie Smith: Farsa y artificio/Farce and Artifice* (Mexico City: MUAC, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo, 2019) 53 (exhibition catalogue: MACBA, Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona [18 May–7 October 2018]; MUAC, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo, UNAM, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Mexico City [25 May–6 October 2019]; and Museo Amparo, Puebla [25 May–7 October 2019]).

Smith shares her response to Blake in “Melanie Smith and the Influence of Blake,” *Hell’s Printing Press* (28 June 2021): <<https://blog.blakearchive.org/2021/06/28/melanie-smith-and-the-influence-of-blake>>.

of the bisexual flag—in nightclubs, film, and television.”³ Playing with the possibilities of still lives and moving pictures, the CCTV footage “reveals fragments of the painting being constructed and deconstructed, but it never reaches a static conclusion.” The random permutations capture work in progress, activating and frustrating the expectation that they might be recomposed into a retroactive still frame, a pregnant moment “in which past, present, and future all collapse into a single gaze.”⁴ José Luis Barrios teases out the Deleuzian dimensions of Smith’s tableaux vivants, from Bruegel and Bosch to Blake: “*Becoming-shot* (internal dura-

3. Alejandra Labastida, “The Symptoms of Turbulence: Or, If You Peer into the Vortex, You’ll See the Spiral City,” *Melanie Smith* 15 and note 3.

4. Labastida (*Melanie Smith* 17), drawing on Sean Carney’s *Brecht and Critical Theory: Dialectics and Contemporary Aesthetics* (New York: Routledge, 2005) 104.

tion) ... disassembled into several cameras ... distending a single scene for two and a half hours." For Barrios, Smith transforms "art and literature into the index of a sensation. At the point where the duration of a thing's state, its affection, coincides with saturated physical framings and with a spatial unfolding across multiple channels, what obtains is a sensory bloc of pure time at the surface: a pure time-image of lustfulness."⁵

In the 2021 London exhibition, the route from the street was mediated by the filter of blue glass doors, which prepared visitors for the blue world of Smith's Blakean Dante. After passing a retro TV screen projecting a visual animation of a vortex algorithm, spectators entered the space of the Circle of the Lustful: a big-screen installation entitled *Vortex: Two Channel Video Work* at the end of the room, marked by an expanded chromatic area defined by cobalt blue walls, carpeting, and cushions. The video work was supplemented by *Amateur Leading Role* photographs taken on the same day as the performance.

While the Mexican performative reenactment of *The Circle of the Lustful* was deterritorialized and fragmented by the CCTV footage projected on the screen upstairs, downstairs Smith's multimedia chromatic experiments were documented by two walls of collages, including occasional small details of naked bodies and newspaper cutouts produced after the video was made. These collages connect Smith's multimedial explorations to the material culture of Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*, a comparative method underpinned by photographic reproductions:

In making the Atlas, Warburg believed that by juxtaposing symbolic images in different sequences the images themselves take on a different pathos or animated life, which he called "thought-image." I think in this way by focusing on the fragment, background, brushstroke in (my) paintings and then zooming in facial expressions, body parts and "stillness" in the video, a strange space opens up. One medium very much depends on the other, because one comes from memory/history (painting) and the other (video) comes from a virtual space where contemporary-mestizo bodies take on a performative role. ... In my way I was very much thinking of the political context in Mexico. More than taking a topographical approach, I focused on Warburg's "thought-image" and the bridging of imaginaries; the precariousness of life conditions in Mexico, and Blake's capacity to portray dispossessed figures.⁶

Smith's analysis of Blake's infernal lovescape required a process of abstraction or decomposition in which the scene was emptied of its bodies so that the snake-shaped spiral that Blake imagined in order to convey their vortex-like propulsion could be translated into a theatrical prop on which twenty-first-century Mexican amateur actors would place themselves as they reenacted the scene as a tableau vivant. This process of decomposition is the governing principle of Smith's *Absent Leading Role Exercises* (2019), pigment-on-wood works exhibited downstairs at Parafin Gallery. These interventions deconstruct Blake's compositions by taking out the main figure(s), using Photoshop to zoom in, "sometimes blowing out of proportion one detail or texture."⁷ As a result, the paintings lose their narrative anchoring, leaving a void contour to mark the absent space that the main character used to inhabit: "The roles have been reversed and the melodrama of the paintings is presented as a series of abstract scenic backdrops."⁸ Smith's interventions operate in the style of surrealist "outographs"—photographs in which the subject has been cut out—or sculptures that capture the empty space enveloping an object by transforming it into a mold and marking the object itself as negative space, as in Rachel Whiteread's works. The process of disanchoring references the artwork by way of outlines marking absent forms. In addition to Dante illustrations, including the numinous red clouds from *Dante and Virgil Approaching the Angel Who Guards the Entrance of Purgatory* (Butlin #812.78) and the vortex in *Beatrice Addressing Dante from the Car* (Butlin #812.88), Smith practiced her art of decomposition on *Newton, The Book of Thel*, "The Ancient of Days," *Jacob's Ladder* (Butlin #438), and *Satan Smiting Job with Sore Boils* (Butlin #807). The display of these works as single paintings, diptychs, triptychs, or series is random: "This is a sort of loose jigsaw puzzle that is not established until the final hang of the paintings. None [is] specifically made to be the 'other half' of another, but there are different visual compositions and strange juxtapositions that arise through different combinations."⁹

5. José Luis Barrios, "Melanie Smith, *Farce and Artifice*: When Humor Pierces the Imaginary," *Melanie Smith* 41-42.

6. Communication with the artist, June 2021.

7. Communication with the artist, June 2021.

8. From Smith's description at *Hell's Printing Press* (see note 2).

9. Communication with the artist, June 2021.



Melanie Smith, *Blake: Absent Leading Role Exercise 6 and 23* (2019). Each pigment on wood, 38 × 34 cm., PFN02323 and 02336.
 Compare Blake, *The Ghost of Samuel Appearing to Saul*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Rosenwald Collection, 1943.3.8996; and *The Agony in the Garden*, Tate, N05894.



Melanie Smith, *Blake: Absent Leading Role Exercise 16, 18, 17, and 9* (2019). Each pigment on wood, 38 × 34 cm., PFN02332, 02334, 02333, and 02326.
 Compare Blake, *Beatrice Addressing Dante from the Car*, Tate, N03369; *Newton*, Tate, N05058; *Beatrice Addressing Dante from the Car*; and *The Ghost of Samuel Appearing to Saul*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Rosenwald Collection, 1943.3.8996.



Melanie Smith, *Blake: Absent Leading Role Exercise 26* (2019). Pigment on wood, 38 × 34 cm., PFN02337.

Compare Blake, *The Lord Answering Job out of the Whirlwind*, Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, 1943.413.



Melanie Smith, *Blake: Absent Leading Role Exercise 27* (2019). Pigment on wood, 38 × 34 cm., PFN02338.

Compare Blake, *Satan Smiting Job with Sore Boils*, Tate, N03340.

23 June–15 December 2021

Swedenborg House, London

The Story of Swedenborg in 27 Objects (curated by museum director Stephen McNeilly)

Exhibition guide: Stephen McNeilly. *The Story of Swedenborg in 27 Objects*. London: Swedenborg Society, 2021. 32 pp.

This display captured the life and legacy of Emmanuel Swedenborg through a collection of objects, including his walking stick and locks of his hair; a miniature wax bust by John Flaxman; the correspondence of the suffragette Josephine Butler with Swedenborg translator and Blake scholar J. J. Garth Wilkinson; and manuscript notebooks for the Japanese translation of Swedenborg's *Heaven and Hell* by D. T. Suzuki, whose publications about Zen Buddhism had an impact on Allen Ginsberg, among others.

“Satan Going Forth from the Presence of the Lord and Job's Charity” [plate numbered 5], *Illustrations of the Book of Job* (1826).

Swedenborg Society, purchased 2018.

“The Fall of Satan” [plate numbered 16], *Illustrations of the Book of Job* (1826).

Swedenborg Society, purchased 2018.

“Job's Sacrifice” [plate numbered 18], *Illustrations of the Book of Job* (1826).

Swedenborg Society, purchased 2018.



6 July–30 September 2021

Strawberry Hill House and Garden, Twickenham

In Focus: Goldfish Bowl (curated by Silvia Davoli)

The exhibition included facsimiles of Blake's watercolors for Thomas Gray's "Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat. Drowned in a Tub of Gold Fishes," part of an extra-illustrated copy of Gray's poems made for Ann Flaxman, now at the Yale Center for British Art. The facsimiles were in a glass cabinet between the Tribune and the Great North Bedchamber at Strawberry Hill.

17 September 2021–9 January 2022

Ashmolean Museum, Oxford

Dante: The Invention of Celebrity (curated by Gervase Rosser)

Exhibition catalogue: Gervase Rosser. *Dante: The Invention of Celebrity*. Oxford: Ashmolean Museum, 2021.

The Ashmolean Dante exhibition started elegantly with Salvador Dalí's first illustration to the *Commedia*, showing Dante tracing his steps through a metaphysically bare page. The reception of Dante was documented from Renaissance illustrated editions to Tom Phillips's *Commedia* (1983), *L'Inferno di Lorenzo Mattotti* (1999), and Geoff MacEwan's 2010 etching "Dante's Vision of Divinity."

Blake's engraving "The Circle of the Lustful," illustrating canto V of the *Inferno*, was part of a vitrine dedicated to Dante's women and the theme of love. On one side was John Flaxman's line engraving of Paolo and Francesca (1793), and on the other a commemorative medal designed by Luigi Gori for the Beatrice exhibition of 1890 (private collection) and a reproduction of Henry Holiday's painting *The Meeting of Dante and Beatrice* (1884; Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool). Hanging behind them on the wall were early twentieth-century postcards of the meeting of Dante and Beatrice at Santa Trinita Bridge in Florence, inspired by Holiday's painting; an engraving of Rachel and Leah from Dante's dream in canto VII of the *Purgatorio*; and an art-nouveau postcard by Enzo Anichini representing Paolo and Francesca.

"The Circle of the Lustful: Francesca da Rimini" ("The Whirlwind of Lovers"), *Blake's Illustrations of Dante* (engraved 1826–27).

Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, WA1941.27.1.

29 September 2021–20 March 2022

Bodleian Library, Oxford

Melancholy: A New Anatomy (curated by Kathryn Murphy, John Geddes, Richard Lawes, Simon D. Kyle, Stephen Puntis, Gulamabbas Lakha, Kate Saunders, Phil Burnet, and Joseph Butler)

To mark the fourth centenary of Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), the exhibition brought together Oxford experts in humanities and mental health to show "how Burton's holistic and multifaceted conception of cure finds surprising echoes in contemporary psychiatry and prescriptions for mental health." "A Cradle Song" was presented in the section on "Sleeping and Waking" because it chimes with Burton's interest in the curative effects of sweet sounds and being "lulled into peaceful, restorative

sleep” “The Lord Answering Job out of the Whirlwind,” from *Illustrations of the Book of Job*, was chosen for its “powerful connections with modern psychotherapy, empowering the individual through a renewed sense of self and reframing perspectives.”¹⁰

“A Cradle Song,” *Songs of Innocence* copy L (composed and printed 1789).
Bodleian Library, Oxford, Arch. G e.42.

“The Lord Answering Job out of the Whirlwind” [plate numbered 13], *Illustrations of the Book of Job* (1826).
Danson Library, Trinity College, Oxford, Blake print no. 13.

10. I am grateful to Ellen Hausner at the Bodleian Library for sharing the exhibition’s captions.

8 October 2021–16 January 2022

Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Rome

La biblioteca di Dante [Dante’s Library] (curated by Roberto Antonelli, Ebe Antetomaso, Marco Guardo, and Lorenzo Mainini)

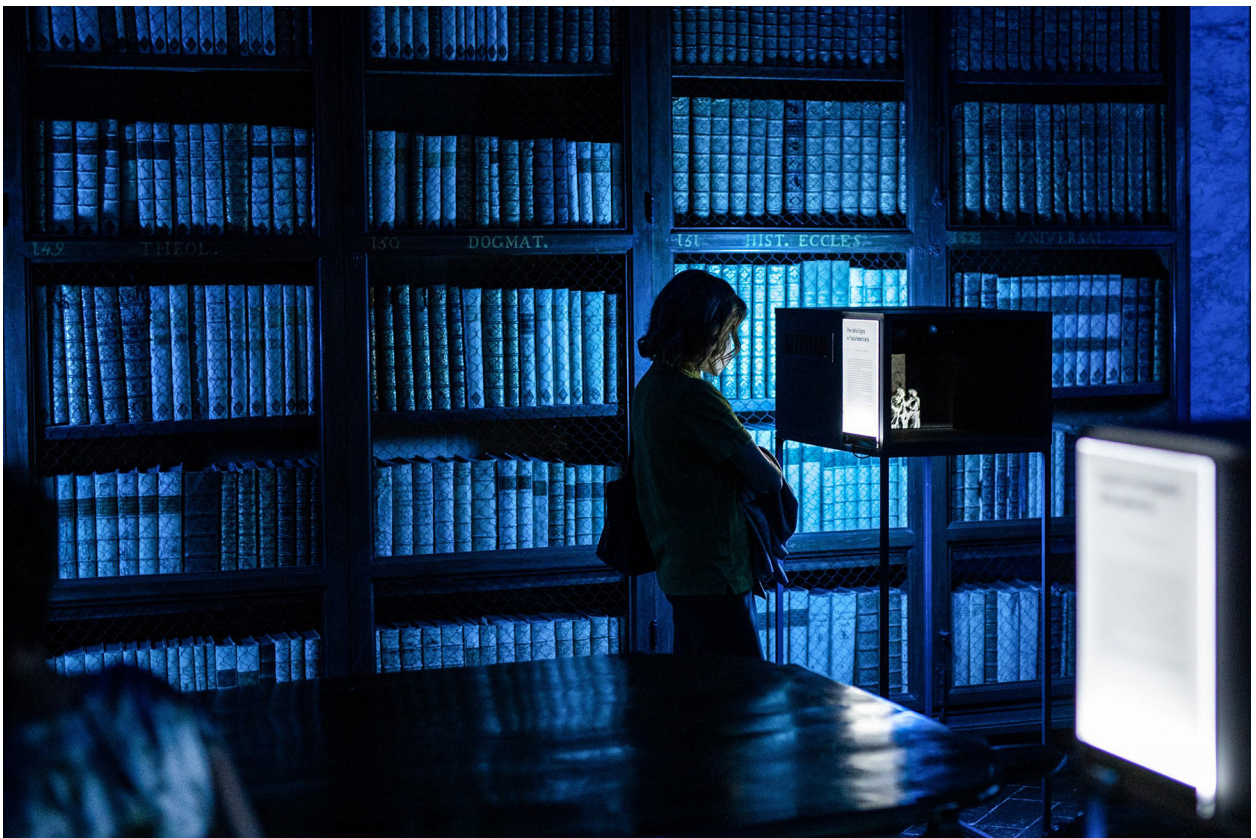
Exhibition catalogue: Roberto Antonelli and Lorenzo Mainini, eds. *La biblioteca di Dante*. Rome: Bardi, 2021. 384 pp.

This centenary exhibition included digital copies of Blake’s Dante illustrations in the final digital iconography section, entitled “Paesaggi e personaggi della *Commedia*. Un’iconografia digitale” [“Landscapes and Characters from the *Commedia*: A Digital Iconography”], curated by Roberto Andreotti and Federico De Melis, designed by OpenLab Company, and coproduced with MIC, Istituto Centrale per il Patrimonio Immateriale [CMI, Central Institute for Immaterial Heritage].

After a reconstruction of the medieval world of Dante’s imagination—exploring what he might have read through



Photos of the exhibition at the Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei are reproduced by permission of Francesco De Melis.



an extraordinary and extensive collection of medieval manuscripts in the splendid frescoed rooms of the academy's library at the Palazzo Corsini—the digital iconography section was enveloped in darkness, with light coming from a series of multisensorial “holoboxes.” These hologram projectors recreated the aesthetics of the camera obscura, while also referencing the tradition of the magic lantern and the theatrical ghost demonstrations of John Henry Pepper (1821–1900). The displays were set up as “stations,” each complemented by a specific “phonosphere” of “contrapuntal” phonic effects produced by ethnomusicologist, video artist, and director Francesco De Melis, with stop-motion and 2D video animation by OpenLab. The digital iconography installation activated documentary anthropology techniques in consultation with CMI and the Archivio di Antropologia Visiva [Archive of Visual Anthropology]. This experiment in immersive technologies and virtual and augmented reality is part of the Central Institute for Immaterial Heritage's plan for “contemporary visions of immateriality,” which aims to enhance Italian culture through film and audiovisual expression, underpinned by a research strategy associated with the Design, Multimedia, and Visual Communication MA of the University of Rome “La Sapienza.”

Station 2, “Pier della Vigna e l'Italia Federiciana” [“Pier della Vigna and Frederician Italy”], was devoted to Dante's depiction of self-inflicted violence in canto XIII of the *Inferno*. A digital file of Blake's *The Wood of the Self-Murderers: The Harpies and the Suicides* (Butlin #812.24) was projected alongside visual documentation of the Frederician court of Pier della Vigna, with photographs of Castel del Monte in Puglia, portraits and sculptural evidence of the emperor from the Metropolitan Museum, and visual responses to Dante's scene across the centuries, from Priamo della Quercia to Pinelli, Doré, Dalí, and Martini, accompanied by a dissonant soundtrack.

Station 3, “Ulisse o la vertigine del conoscere” [“Ulysses or the Vertigo of Knowing”], devoted to fraudulent counselors in *Inferno* XXVI, projected *Ulysses and Diomed Swathed in the Same Flame* (Butlin #812.55), together with works by de Groux, Martini, Böcklin, Rothaug, Flaxman, Bauchant, Cagli, and Cambellotti.

Station 5, “Manfredi, Purgatorio e Benevento” [“Manfredi, Purgatorio, and Benevento”], marked the ascent of the Mount of Purgatory with two details from Blake's illustration from *Purgatorio* IV (Butlin #812.74), as well as objects that provided a historical mise-en-scène and works by Doré, Bronzino, Botticelli, Flaxman, Zuccari, Nattini, and Martini.

15 October 2021–23 January 2022
Scuderie del Quirinale, Rome
***Inferno* (curated by Jean Clair)**

Exhibition catalogue: Jean Clair and Laura Bossi, eds. *Inferno*. Milan: Electa, 2021. 480 pp. Includes Michael Edwards, “Blake nell'inferno dantesco.”

The portrait of Dante that Blake painted for William Hayley's library hung on the information wall of the section entitled “L'inferno di Dante: Il Canone Illustrato”/“Dante's *Inferno*: The Illustrated Canon,” in the middle of the lower floor of the exhibition.



Photos of this exhibition are reproduced by permission of the Scuderie del Quirinale, Rome. Images: Alberto Novelli.

To the left and right of the portrait, two sculptural groups in bronze by Auguste Rodin (1882; Musée Rodin, Paris) and Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux (c. 1858; Musée d'Orsay, Paris) registered the visual metamorphoses of the subject of Ugolino and his sons, which Blake himself immortalized in his depiction of the medieval Italian poet. The wall text summarized the range of Dante illustrations over the centuries: medieval illuminated manuscripts, some of which were exhibited in the previous room, Botticelli's “Dante on vellum,” series of illustrations by Federico Zuccari and Giovanni Stradano, John Flaxman's “severe linear style” associated with “Botticelli's graphic purity,” and then Blake, praised for “imagining, especially for the *Inferno*, iconographies endowed with extraordinary fantastic-visionary



impact.”¹¹ The last artists mentioned in the wall text were Gustave Doré and the contemporary Spanish artist Miquel Barceló: Doré’s illustrations were documented by a watercolor representing Dante and Virgil in the eighth circle of hell, in the same room as the Blake portrait; a copy of the illustrated edition; and the large oil on canvas *Dante et Virgile dans le neuvième cercle de l’Enfer* (1861) in the following room, which also featured Dante watercolors by Barceló. Upstairs, the exhibition explored allegorical inflections of Dante’s hell in depictions of the horrors of war, including Goya’s engraved series. Finally, the way out was signaled by an arresting metal book of stars by Anselm Kiefer: just like Dante, the viewer emerged from hell to see the stars again.

Michael Edwards’s catalogue essay complements what was on view in the exhibition with a choice of watercolors (pp. 191-94): *The Vestibule of Hell and the Souls Mustering to Cross the Acheron* (Butlin #812.5), *The Circle of the Lustful: Francesca da Rimini* (Butlin #812.10), *Dante and Virgil Escaping from the Devils* (Butlin #812.43 recto), and *The Stygian Lake with the Ireful Sinners Fighting* (Butlin #812.15).

11. “immaginando soprattutto per l’Inferno iconografie di straordinario impatto fantastico-visionario.”

Dante Alighieri (c. 1800–03). Butlin #343.4.
Manchester Art Gallery, 1885.16.
Reproduced in *Inferno 217*, cat. no. 65.