I could not set you in our country's earth."
Priam's son answered: "You neglected nothing.
You did your duty by my ghost and me.
Fate and the Spartan woman's fatal sin
Have plunged me in this torment—her memorial.
You know how we were duped, and celebrated
That last night?—no, there's no way to forget it.
The fatal horse, pregnant with infantry,
Leaped to our citadel, steep Pergama,
And Helen led around our Trojan women
In a sham of Bacchic rites and held a great torch
Herself: our tower signaled to the Greeks.
Anxiety had worn me into dull sleep
In my unlucky bed. A sweet, deep rest,
Peaceful as death, muffled me as I lay there.
Meanwhile my prize wife cleared the house of weapons—
Even the trusted sword beneath my pillow.
She opened up our door to Menelaus—
Hoping, I guess, this favor for her old flame
Would kill the stink of all her crimes before.
I'll make it brief: they burst in, with Ulysses,
Who's behind every crime. Gods, pay the Greeks back!
The mouth I ask this with does not speak evil.
But come—now you: what brought you here still living?
Off course in voyaging, were you driven down?
Did gods direct you? What tormenting fortune
Shows you this sunless town, this sea of darkness?"
Aurora's rosy chariot in the ether
Soared past the zenith while the two were talking.
They might have used up all the time permitted,
But Aeneas' guide, the Sibyl, curtly warned him.
"Night rushes in, and tears take up the hours.
The road divides here. This branch on the right,
Which stretches to the walls of powerful Dis,
Will take us to Elysium. The left one
Sends criminals to their due in Tartarus.
"Great priestess, don't be angry," said Deiphobus.
"I'll take my place again in that dark gathering.
Go on, Troy's glory—may your fate be better."
He turned his steps back as he finished speaking.
Aeneas turned, and right there, to his left,
Stood a fortress with three walls beneath a cliff.
A raging stream of flame called Phlegethon,
With crashing, whirling stones, encircled it.
This faced a massive gate and pure steel columns.
No human power, no power of gods at war
Themselves could tear it up. An iron tower soars.
Tisiphone, sleepless guard, sits in the entrance
Day and night in her hitched-up, bloody robe.
From this place echo savage blows and groans,
The shriek of iron and the drag of chains.
Terror transfixed Aeneas at the din.
"What crimes did they commit? Tell me, pure virgin!
And the punishments? Such howls go toward the sky!"
"Great leader of the Trojans," she began,
"No righteous man may cross this wicked threshold.
Yet Hecate, when she placed Averns' woods
In my charge, showed the ways gods punish mortals.
Here Cretan Rhadamanthus rules, unyielding,
He puts each lie on trial, extracts confessions
Of sins not expiated there above,
Hidden with stupid relish, till it's too late.
Vengeful Tisiphone, ready with her whip,
Swoops, lashing. With the fierce snakes in her left hand,
She threatens, and calls the band of her cruel sisters.
Finally, with a grisly scream of hinges,
The holy doors fall open. Do you see
Her form that sits and guards the entranceway?
A fiercer monster lives inside, the Hydra,
With fifty black throats. Tartarus itself
Then plunges, twice as far beneath the shades
As the view up toward heavenly Olympus.
Titans, an ancient Earth-born race, struck down
By lightning long ago, writhe at the bottom.
Aelous’ giant twins are there—I’ve seen them.
They tried to wrench away the towering sky,
Attack the gods, and thrust Jove from his kingdom.
And there I saw Salome cruely punished—
He aped Jove’s flames and the Olympian thunder.
Shaking a torch, he drove his chariot
In triumph through Greek nations, through his city
Of Elis, claiming honors that the gods have—
Fool: the inimitable thundercloud
Shammed by the beat of hooves on a bronze bridge!
Then the almighty father hurled his weapon—
Which was no guttering pine torch—through the cloudbanks
And drove him headlong in a monstrous whirlwind.
Tityon, reared by all-begetting Earth,
Was there to see, stretched over nine whole acres.
A giant vulture with its hooked beak browses
On his deathless liver. Through his pain-rich innards
It burrows, feeding—living in his torso;
And with no rest, his viscera grow back.
What about the Lapiths, Ixion, Pirithous?
A flint crag hangs above them, set to topple—
It seems—at any second. Banquet couches
Rear high, with shining gold posts. Splendid food
Is spread before their eyes. But the chief Fury,
The guest beside them, will not let them touch it.
She leaps up, thrusts her torch at them, and roars.
Those who while living hated brothers, struck
Their fathers, or wove fraud around dependents;
And those who crouched alone on newfound riches
(The largest crowd), not sharing with their families;
Adulterers killed when caught, and rebel warriors,
Bold criminals, betrayers of their lords:
Locked up, all wait for sentencing. Don’t query
The kinds of torments Fortune’s plunged them in.
Some roll immense rocks, some are splayed on wheel spokes.
Poor Theseus sits there, and will sit forever.
Phlegyas in his torture shrieks a warning
To everyone—his voice rings through the shadows:
“Learn justice from my fate—and fear the gods.”
One sold his country and imposed a tyrant;
One, for a price, made laws and then remade them.
One stormed his daughter’s room—a lawless marriage.
All of them dared great evil and succeeded.
A hundred tongues and mouths, a voice of iron
Would not allow me to describe the crimes
In all their forms, or list the punishments.”
The ancient priestess of Apollo added,
“Come, hurry on. Finish the task you started.
Faster! I see the walls the Cyclopes
Have forged. There are the doors beneath the archway,
Where we must place our gifts, as we were told to.”
They stepped along the dark route, side by side,
Crossed the gap quickly and approached the doors.
Aeneas shook fresh water on himself,
And faced the sill, and set the branch there, upright.
Their duty to the goddess done at last,
They came into a glad land: pleasant grounds
In forests of good fortune, bessed home.
A richer, shimmering air arrays these fields,
Which have their own familiar sun and stars.
Men exercised on grassy fields, competed
In games or wrestled in the tawny sand.
Some stamped their dancing feet and chanted songs.
And there the Thracian singer, in his long robe,
Played to the beat, through seven intervals,
Changing between his ivory pick and fingers.
Here was the ancient dynasty of Teucer, Handsome, courageous, born in better years: Ilus, Assaracus, Dardanus, Troy's founder. Far off, Aeneas marveled at ghost chariots And armor, planted spears, and scattered horses Grazing untethered. The delight the living Take in their arms and chariots, the appeal Of pasturing shining beasts survives the tomb. Aeneas looked from side to side: some heroes Feasted and sang a joyous hymn of praise On fields near fragrant laurel stands. Through these rolled Mighty Eridanus to the world above. This group was wounded fighting for their country; These, while they lived, had been pure priests; these prophets In their righteousness deserved to speak for Phoebus. Some had enriched our life with their inventions, Or left the memory of some great service. All of them had white bands around their foreheads. They poured around the Sibyl, and she spoke— To Musaeus chiefly (all that huge crowd gazed up As he towered, massive-shouldered, in the center): "Tell me, you happy souls, and you, great singer, Where can we find Anchises, in which region? For him we sailed through Erebus' wide rivers." With a few words the hero answered her: "We have no houses. Dim woods are our homes, Stream banks our couches, verdant flowing meadows Our settlements. But if you speak your heart's will, Come up this easy path to climb the ridge." He stepped ahead and showed the shining plains That stretched below, but soon they left the high ground. Father Anchises, deep in a green valley, Cherishingly surveyed the souls confined there Before emerging to the light. He happened Now to be tallying his dear descendants— Lives, destinies, achievements, characters— And when he saw Aeneas making toward him Over the grass, he stretched his hands out, blissful. The tears poured down his cheeks, and he exclaimed, "You've come at last?—love made you take this hard road, Just as I thought?—and can I see your face, My child, hear your beloved voice, and answer? Really, I counted on this, calculated The time, and anxious hope did not deceive me. Welcome! How many lands and wide seas sent you, My son, and on what giant waves of danger! And how I feared the Libyan realm would hurt you." Aeneas answered, "Father, your sad image, Which often meets me, called me to this realm. My ships stand in the Tuscan sea. My hand— Clasp it and don't retreat from my embrace." The tears poured down his face. Three times he tried To throw his arms around his father's neck, Three times the form slid from his useless hands, Like weightless wind or dreams that fly away. The hero now saw, at the valley's end, A sheltered woods. Wind murmured in its branches. The river Lethe drifted past the still homes. Above the water, souls from countless nations Flitted, like bees in tranquil summer meadows Who move from bud to vivid bud and stream Around white lilies—the whole field whirs loudly. The unexpected sight enthralled Aeneas. He wished to learn about it—what the stream was, And what men filled the banks in that great phalanx. Father Anchises answered, "These are souls Fate owes new bodies. Here at Lethe's river They drink up long oblivion and peace. All of this time, I've yearned to tell of them And let you see them, counting my descendants,
To share my joy that you’ve reached Italy.
“Father, do some souls really soar back skyward
From here, returning into sluggish bodies?
What dreadful longing sends them toward the light?”
“I’ll free you from suspense, my child,” he answered,
And told it all, in detail and in order.
“Now first, the earth and sky and plains of water,
The moon’s bright globe, the sun and stars are nurtured
By a spirit in them. Mind infuses each part
And animates the universe’s whole mass.
So arise men and grazing beasts and creatures
That fly and monsters in the glittering ocean.
Their seeds have fiery force; they come from heaven.
And yet the noxious body slows them somewhat.
The earthly parts that perish make them numb.
Those parts bring fear, desire, joy, and sorrow.
Souls in dark dungeons cannot see the sky.
But when, on the last day, a life departs,
Not every evil sickness of the body
Wholly withdraws from that poor spirit—many
Are long grown in, mysteriously ingrained.
So souls are disciplined and pay the price
Of old wrongdoing. Some are splayed, exposed
To hollow winds; a flood submerges some,
Washing out wickedness; fire scorches some pure.
Each bears his own ghosts, then a few are sent
To live in broad Elysium’s happy fields,
Till time’s great circle is completed, freeing
The hardened stain so the ethereal mind,
The fire of pure air, is left unsullied.
When they have circled through a thousand years,
God calls them all in one long rank to Lethe,
To send them back forgetful to the sky’s vault,
With a desire to go back into bodies.”
Anchises finished, and he drew the two guests
Into the middle of the murmuring crowd.
He climbed a ridge that showed him every man
In the long line. He knew each face approaching.
“Come, hear your destiny, and the future glory
Of the stock of Dardanus, all the descendants
That we will have from the Italian race—
Great souls who will be born into our family.
That young man leaning on a headless spear
Will take the next turn in the airy light:
Your posthumous son Silvius (a name
From Alba), first of Troy’s Italian bloodline.
Lavinia will raise him in the forest,
And he will be a king and father kings:
Our family that will reign at Alba Longa.
By him stands Procas, glory of Troy’s race,
Then Capys, Numitor, and Aeneas Silvius,
Your namesake, irreproachable, high-hearted—
If ever he succeeds to Alba’s kingship.
What fine young men! You see the strength in them.
Oak leaves of civic honor shade their temples.
They’ll found Nomentum, Gabii, Fidenae,
The fortress of Collatia on the mountains,
Pometii, Castrum Inui, Bola, Cora—
The famous names of places nameless now.
Romulus, child of Mars, and through his mother
A Trojan, will become her father’s ally.
You see the twin crests? They’re a special emblem
The father of the gods already gives him.
Under the omens this man saw, renowned Rome
Will rule the world and raise her heart to heaven—
Blessed in her sons, with seven citadels
In one wall: like the tower-crowned Great Mother
Driving her chariot through Phrygian cities,
Holding in blissful arms her hundred grandsons
From gods—all gods themselves, who live in heaven.