

Divine in Life

"The Homeric Gods," by **Walter F. Otto** (translated by Moses Hadas. Pantheon Books. 310 pp. \$5), is a German scholar's fresh interpretation of the religious significance of the Homeric stories. Edith Hamilton, who reviews it below, is the author of *"The Greek Way"* and other books.

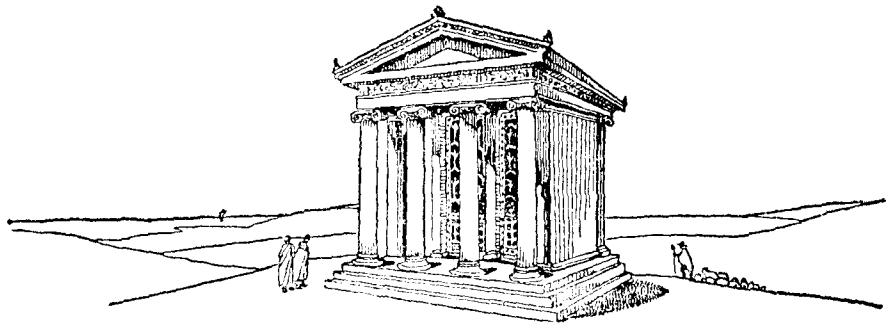
By Edith Hamilton

WALTER F. OTTO'S "The Homeric Gods" is a book which should be read not only by those interested in Greek mythology, but by those interested in the Greek mind. The original is in German, but the translation is admirable. Through the translator's subtle skill and beauty of style it has become an English book. No one who is acquainted with Moses Hadas's translation will be surprised, but to me this is his most notable achievement.

There are two main reasons why the book is valuable. The less important is that it quotes everything said by Homer about the gods and much that the other poets say, giving even a reader who knows them, but has read them only separately, a fresh and vivid impression. But the chief claim to interest is that it is a book about the Olympians written with religious fervor. Those enchanting stories, discarded long ago as of no religious significance, considered at best trivial and childish, appear here in a pure religious light. As far as I know, Professor Otto's point of view is unique.

The real religion of the Olympic gods was centered in life, what Christ called "life more abundantly." It had cast off the power of dark mystery, Professor Otto tells us, from which it had arisen; it was concerned only with clarity and the power of reality, with the beauty that is truth and the truth that is beauty. "Greek religion," Professor Otto writes, "regarded the essence of humanity as divine. . . . The Greek united reverent recognition to acute observation of the real. . . . It was not desire or aspiration, but life, that steeped him in the purple brilliance of the divine. . . . He encountered his deities in the likeness of man; he discovered his own nobility and grandeur in their images."

It is a far cry from this conception to the way in which most religions have been conceived. Consider the appalling divinity of the Pentateuch. He is unhuman. One of his names is the Fear of Isaac. He is described as saying: "I will make mine arrows drunk



—From "Builders of the Old World" (Little, Brown).

with blood and my sword shall devour flesh, with the blood of the slain and of the captive."

Deity would never have appeared to the Greek under such an aspect. The Olympians, in Professor Otto's words, "are never unhuman; they are superhuman, but always real with the truth of life. Theirs is the rapture of imperishable youth, beauty, and grandeur, not terrifying, but enlightening, bright and free."

CONSIDER again an almost modern divinity who foreordained to eternal torture beings he had created: "All mankind by Adam's fall lost communion with God, are under his wrath and curse, and so made liable to the ills of this life, to death, and the pains of hell forever." The Greek would have turned with horror or with scorn from that picture of illimitable malice. For himself he knew that he could not lose communion with the divine. He was surrounded by it, by the perfect living forms of the gods, eternal realities. Professor Otto writes of this Greek conviction in words which apply also to the great Christian conception of the Incarnation, the divine in the human: "The perfect human reality takes the place of the image or symbol. The most excellent of the forms of this world must be the image of the godhead. . . . Godhead here implies the manifestation at nature's highest point of its greatest glory and truth. . . . In that the god bears human traits, he exhibits in its most spiritual aspect this realm [of all life]."

The Olympians are regarded as a gay and rollicking company, and so they were. They are held—and truly—to be imperfect moralists, capable of deplorable deeds. Even so, Professor Otto shows another aspect of them which is true and which is profoundly important. Greek religion offered no refuge from this world, but it saw the natural, existence as it actually is in the real world, as capable of revealing the spiritual and the eternal.

Professor Otto quotes Hölderlin's line: "Who most deeply has thought loves what is most alive."

Our Greek Roots

"The Spring of Civilization," by **Charles Alexander Robinson, Jr.** (E. P. Dutton. 464 pp. \$7.50), is an anthology of the intellectual and artistic remains of that period even the ancients acknowledged to be "classic," the fifth century B. C. Moses Hadas, who reviews it here, is professor of Greek and Latin at Columbia University and author of *"A History of Greek Literature."*

By Moses Hadas

OUR OWN civilization, all literate people agree, is based ultimately upon the Greek achievement, and one of the reasons it sometimes appears so crazy and teetering a structure is that its upper stories are less and less truly centered upon their original foundations. These foundations are themselves obviously the best plumb line for assessing deviations, and at the same time a pattern by which to refine our conceptions of our own premises and practices. Hence a book which makes the ancient experience accessible can do more than satisfy antiquarian or esthetic curiosity: it can enhance our understanding of our own problems and our resources for confronting them.

The whole of the Greek experience, Charles Alexander Robinson, Jr., recognizes, cannot be presented in a single book, and so in "The Spring of Civilization" he has limited himself to the period which the ancients themselves and all their posterity have agreed to call classic—the Age of Pericles. From that period he has chosen six tragedies (Aeschylus's "Agamemnon"; Sophocles's "Oedipus the King," "Oedipus at Colonus," and "Antigone"; Euripides's "Medea" and "Trojan Women"), two Platonic dialogues ("Apology" and "Symposium"), two passages from Thucydides (the Melian dialogue and the end of the Syracusan campaign), one from

Xenophon (the reception of the news of Aegospotami), and some seventy photographs, mostly of buildings on the Acropolis. Professor Robinson's introductory comments to his four main divisions amount to some twenty-five pages, and he has added a brief chronological summary and bibliography. In effect, then, his book is an anthology of the intellectual and artistic remains of Athens in the latter half of the fifth century B.C.

IT IS a mark of respect to the reader to give him original documents rather than a discussion of them, and no one can deny that the documents Professor Robinson has chosen are central. But we may question the adequacy of the book nevertheless. Whether (as I think likely) the reader who takes this book up is already familiar with these classics, or (as Professor Robinson apparently thinks) he encounters them, as everyone sometime must, for the first time, he should be given some more extended explication, particularly of the tragedies and the "Symposium." A new reader cannot apprehend more than the outer layer of these richly meaningful pieces without guidance, and a reader already familiar with them should at least be shown how they relate to the humanism which I take to be Professor Robinson's *leitmotif*. Without understanding in some depth they are, in Thucydides's phrase, display pieces for the moment, not a possession for evermore. Both the tragic poets and their readers are entitled to something better, in so sumptuous a volume, than the stale translations (except for Mendell's "Oedipus") which comprise three-fourths of this volume. For a school text, which students are *required* to read, and under guidance, Professor Robinson has presented fresher versions of six Greek plays at a fraction of the price. Considering current production costs this handsome volume with its lavish plates is not overpriced, and it will contribute effectively to the purpose for which it is designed. But, having once got the attention of "the general reader and him alone," to whom Professor Robinson addresses his book, it is something of a pity that he does not exploit his opportunity more fully.

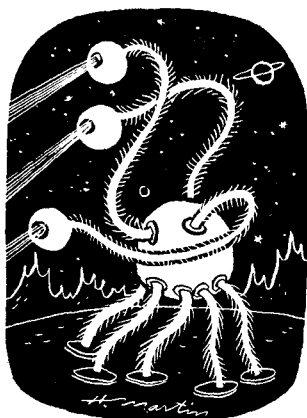
Man's Origins

HOW THE MYTHS BEGAN: One of the most tantalizing of all speculations is about the origins of mankind and the myths associated with its religious beginnings. G. R. Levy has applied the perceptive, specialized techniques of

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FICTION

The Season's Science Fiction



Fletcher Pratt, a prolific writer and anthologist of science fiction and fantasy, is constantly watching the field to keep SR readers posted on important new developments. Here he reports on nine volumes published during the past season which he feels most deserve the attention of discriminating readers.

By Fletcher Pratt

ON THE whole, it has been a rather poor season for science fiction and fantasy, though poorer for the latter than the former. The sudden check in the operations of Ballantine Books, which for a time was threatening to take over the whole field, is no doubt partly responsible; but so also is the fact that the specialty publishers, who depend almost entirely on reprinting "classics" from the magazines, and the anthologists, who are entirely dependent upon this source, have been running out of good material. Most of the recent anthologies are remarkable rather for ingenuity of concept than perfection of execution, and will convince none of the doubting Thomases that this literary form is something to be taken seriously.

There are, of course, honorable exceptions. One is Frederik Pohl's "Star Science Fiction Stories, No. 2" (Ballantine, paperbound, 35¢; clothbound, \$2), which by using only original stories by hand-picked authors beats most of the anthologists at their own game and quite outdoes the magazines at theirs. Another exception is the third "Best from Fantasy and Science Fiction" (Doubleday, \$3.25), which has become an annual under the editor-

ship of Anthony Boucher and J. Francis McComas. This anthology has the double advantage of not excluding pure fantasy, which gives it a much wider range than the rest, and of having been kept in mind by the twin editors from the beginning, so that when they got hold of a really hot story for their magazine they immediately exercised seignoral rights and let no one else have a chance at it for an anthology.

A third exception is the new Groff Conklin job, "Science Fiction Thinking Machines" (Vanguard, \$3.50), in which the editor has quite rightly broken the taboo against using stories that have appeared elsewhere in hard covers, and as a result has come up with a remarkably fine collection to illustrate the various lines of thought about robots (including Capek's "R.U.R." which started the whole thing), androids, and computers. A good part are more remarkable for the ideas expressed than for the stories—but for that matter, so is a good part of science fiction generally.

Of the collections of stories by a single author the only one really ranking with the best of other years is "Untouched by Human Hands," by Robert Sheckley (Ballantine, paperbound, 35¢). It has twelve short stories, mixed science fiction and fantasy, and every single one of them is right up to the John Collier level. If you want an introduction, try "The Demons."

THERE has been a notable tendency on the part of the general publishers who have taken up science fiction to turn out books which have not appeared in magazines, and it is curious that two of the best, "Wild Talent," by Wilson Tucker (Rinehart, \$2.50), and "More Than Human," by Theodore Sturgeon (Farrar, Straus & Young, clothbound, \$2; Ballantine, paperbound, 35¢) should deal with the same theme in quite different ways. (Part of the Sturgeon book did see magazine publication, but only part, and that with a conclusion that leaves the book version incomparably the more satisfying and effective.) The theme is telepathy, telekinesis, and related matters, which seem to be getting a good deal of attention from science-fiction writers, and so far as I know Mr. Sturgeon is the first writer to produce a plausible theory of how these things could work in-