



SØREN KIERKEGAARD

(1813-1855)

lived only forty-two years. Yet in his short life, he wrote more than twenty-five books. After his death, his works slipped into obscurity.

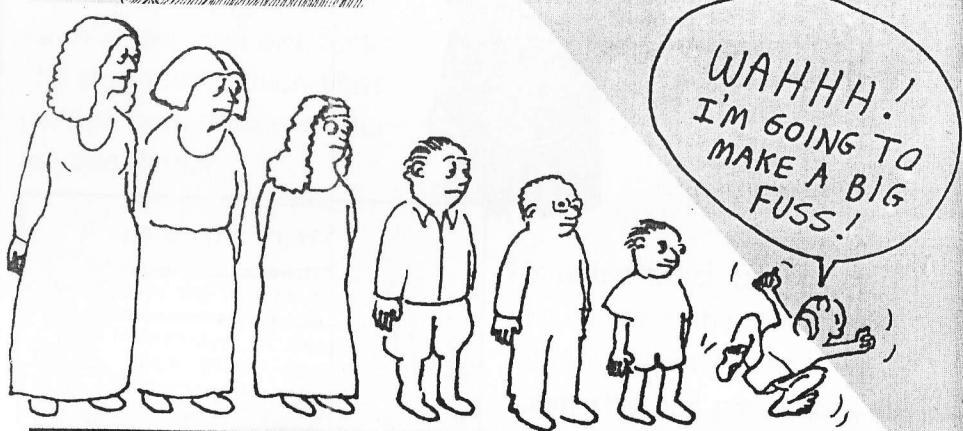
When they were rediscovered in the twentieth century they revolutionized European thinking and produced the philosophy that came to be known as

EXISTENTIALISM.





Søren Kierkegaard was born in Copenhagen on May 5, 1813, the last of seven children. His mother, Anne Lund Kierkegaard, was his old father's second wife and had been the maid of the first Mrs. Kierkegaard during the period of her final illness.



There remains the hint of a sexual impropriety between Michael and the maid during the last months of the life of the terminally ill Mrs. Kierkegaard. This sin or some other (perhaps the one from Michael's childhood) had made the old man an overbearing religious penitent who was morbidly fanatical in his belief that he had offended God.

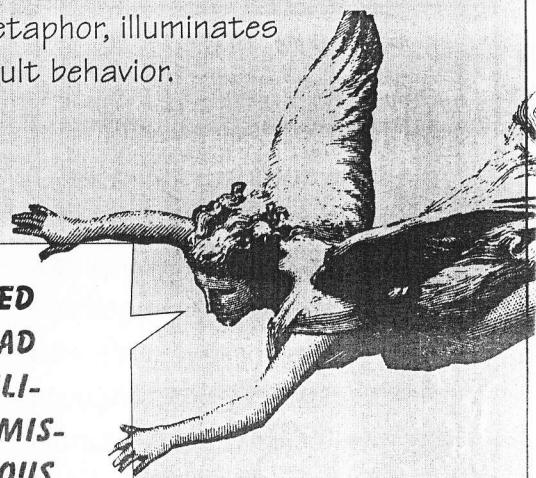
I AM
GUILTY!



In a certain sense, young Søren was sacrificed on the altar of his father's religiosity, or he almost was, just as young Isaac of the Biblical story was almost sacrificed on his father's altar.

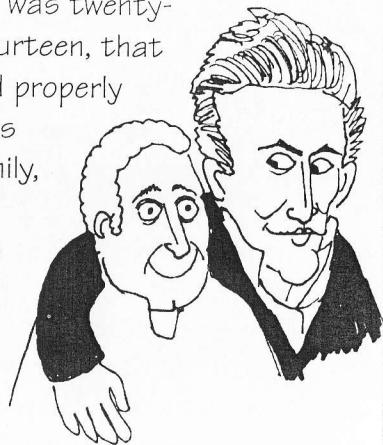
It is no mere coincidence that Kierkegaard was fascinated by the story of Abraham and Isaac all his life. This story, taken as a metaphor, illuminates much of Kierkegaard's adult behavior.

FOR EXAMPLE, HE BELIEVED THAT HIS "NORMALITY" HAD BEEN SACRIFICED ON A RELIGIOUS ALTAR. HIS SPECIFIC MISSION—BASICALLY A RELIGIOUS ONE—PREVENTED HIM FROM BEING LIKE OTHER PEOPLE. IT PRECLUDED MARRIAGE, PARENTHOOD, FAMILY LIFE, AND A CAREER.





Partially liberated from his morbid past, one of the first things Kierkegaard did was fall in love and become engaged. Most people who read about his romance with his fiancée, Regina Olsen, do not like the way he comported himself with her. He met her when he was twenty-one and she was fourteen, that is to say, three years before he could properly court her. He spent those three years well, ingratiating himself with her family, finding out everything about her he could, placing himself in a position to influence her aesthetic taste, and even befriending her boyfriend, Fritz Schlegel, using his position of confidence to undermine poor Fritz.



In his pseudonymous fictional story, "Diary of a Seducer," Kierkegaard tells of the seduction of a young woman by a man who studies her every gesture. The reader of the story realizes that the woman is doomed because of the totality of the seducer's plan. Similarly, those who know the thoroughness of Kierkegaard's plotting to win Regina feel that she, too, was snared before she had a chance to react. Sure enough, when Regina turned seventeen, Søren wooed her and won her. The engagement party took place, and the announcement was published.



Kierkegaard seemed happy with his victory and was well on his way to becoming a solidly entrenched member of the bourgeois establishment, when suddenly for no reason he shared with anyone else, he broke the engagement. In his diary he wrote that he had done so because "God had vetoed the marriage." Regina was heartbroken and begged him to return to her. Her father humiliated himself pleading Regina's case. Kierkegaard was intractable and cold. He allowed himself to be seen frolicking in questionable neighborhoods of Copenhagen.



Ludwig Feuerbach and Michael Bakunin—each of whom would later exert a powerful influence on European thought.

After the termination of the academic quarter, he returned to Copenhagen, but when he thought he saw Regina nod at him in church, he fled to Berlin again. While in Berlin this second time he wrote one of his greatest books, Fear and Trembling, his book about Abraham and Isaac, and it contained a secret message for Regina.

Then he disappeared from Denmark and sneaked off to Berlin, where he enrolled at the University in a course on Hegelian philosophy under the prominent Professor Schelling, and where his classmates included none other than Friedrich Engels,



In one of the book's many interpretations of Abraham's story, Kierkegaard imagines Abraham as pretending before Isaac that it was not God who had demanded Isaac's death, but that Abraham himself desired it because he was an idolater and a murderer. Abraham feigns being a criminal so that Isaac, with his dying breath, would curse Abraham and not God. So, Kierkegaard had acted like a cad in order that Regina would not blame God for the sacrifice of the love between her and Søren!

Moreover, Kierkegaard wrote in his diary that by assuming responsibility for the break, he would free Regina to love again. Yet, when he returned from Berlin and discovered that she was engaged to Fritz Schlegel, Kierkegaard was beside himself with jealousy and a sense of loss. Some time later he wrote in his journal,

