

Field Notes

WHAT'S IN A FACE? have rushed to fill it.

A REMARKABLE FACE STARES out from the front cover of Michael Weston's *Kierkegaard and Modern Continental Philosophy* (Routledge, 1994). The arched eyebrows indicate the deepest perplexity; the pursed lips, an ironic detachment from the passing scene. There is one thing wrong with this picture, however—it's not a portrait of Soren Kierkegaard at all, but of his somewhat less renowned compatriot, the nineteenth-century Danish thinker Christian Molbech.

How did this case of mistaken identity come about? Well, it turns out that Kierkegaard was averse to having his portrait done, and left behind only a handful of passable likenesses, most of which don't even resemble each other. In other words, he bequeathed a visual information gap, and others

Soren Kierkegaard (left) and his stand-ins.



Molbech is hardly the only impostor. A recent Danish bestseller about Kierkegaard—its title translates as “life is understood backwards, but must be lived forwards”—errantly features a drawing of the theologian H.N. Clausen among its purported Kierkegaards. Elsewhere, a picture of the Danish lawyer-politician F.W. Treschow continues to be presented as the Copenhagen philosopher, as does a self-portrait of the artist P.C. Klastrup.

With Copenhagen set to be the official “cultural capital” of Europe in 1996, the unsolved mystery of Kierkegaard's looks poses something of a problem. As part of the festivities, the Danes plan to host a number of Kierkegaard-related events—an international conference, a series of lectures, and several exhibitions devoted to his life and work. But how do you tout the man without the face?

A recent Kierkegaard



sighting might have offered some help. In 1991, Paul A. Bauer, an American graduate student at the University of Copenhagen, came upon two caricatures of Kierkegaard in a secondhand bookshop; they appeared in a bound volume of the once-popular nineteenth-century Danish periodical *Folkets Nisse* (“The People's Elf”). At the time, Bauer didn't buy the volume, because he thought the price, \$60, was too steep. Three years later, however, Bauer discovered that the drawings were unknown to scholars and reconsidered. He returned to the shop, found the book still sitting on the shelf, and took it home with him. Alas, the caricatures turned out to be of little use: they're crudely drawn and—once again—show little resemblance to each other.

Of course, Kierkegaard might not have minded all



the lingering uncertainty about his appearance. Throughout his career, he flirted with identities and spoke through an elaborate veil of pseudonyms. A reader needn't know, he implied, who the real author of a work was, much less what he looked like. As he once put it, a writer could just as well be a “Balaam's ass or a guffawing fool or an apostle or an angel.” Does it really matter? —M.G. Piety

