IN MEMORIAM
William J. Richardson, S.J. (1920-2016)

Thomas Sheehan

ἀνδρός, ὡς ἡμεῖς φαίμεν ἂν,
tῶν τότε ἂν ἐπειράθημεν
ἄριστοι καὶ ἄλλως φρονημοτάτου καὶ δικαιοτάτου.

Professor William J. Richardson, S.J.—the brilliant philosopher and writer, psychoanalyst and teacher, mentor and friend to two generations of students and colleagues—died on 10 December 2016, at the beginning of his 97th year, in Weston, Massachusetts.

Richardson’s masterwork, Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought (1963), was the first treatise in any language to present a comprehensive interpretation of the whole of Heidegger’s work as it was known up through the late 1950s. Written with a clarity and precision that few have managed to imitate, this immense tome radically shifted how scholars came to view Heidegger: no longer as an existentialist in the mold of Jean-Paul Sartre but rather as a philosopher in pursuit of the elusive “X,” die Sache selbst, that enables and requires us to understand the so-called “being” of things, that is, their current significance in the worlds of our lived concerns.

I
THE LIFE

Born in Brooklyn in 1920, William J. Richardson attended Holy Cross College, Worcester, Massachusetts from 1937 to 1941, where besides a brilliant curriculum, he was noted for his consummate theatrical skills both as Shakespeare’s Richard II and as Sophocles’ Antigone in a performance of the tragedy entirely in Greek. Upon graduation he entered the Society of Jesus at St. Andrew on Hudson in Poughkeepsie, New York, and thereafter followed a typical course of Jesuit formation:

1941-43 novitiate
1944-47 licentiate in philosophy: Woodstock College, Maryland
1947-50 regency: teaching English and philosophy at Le Moyne College, Syracuse
1950-54 licentiate in theology: Collège Saint-Albert, Eegenhoven-Louvain
1953 ordination to the priesthood
1954-55 tertianship: in Austria.

Richardson’s desire was to go on to a doctorate in theology under Karl Rahner, S.J. (1904-1984), who was then teaching in Innsbruck and had just begun publishing his multi-volume Schriften zur Theologie. During his year of tertianship Richardson met with Rahner and told him he would like to write on the theology of death – at which point Rahner offered him access to all his unpublished manuscripts on the topic. But Richardson’s superiors decided against that path and insisted he take the Ph.D. in philosophy so as eventually to teach metaphysics in the United States. ¹

¹ At first his superiors had told him it would be a good idea to study philosophy in Rome, where he might have heard the lectures of Bernard Lonergan, who taught at the Pontifical Gregorian University from 1953 to 1964.
Having matriculated (none too happily) at Louvain’s Institut Supérieur de Philosophie and chosen (quite happily) Alphonse De Waelhens as his supervisor, Richardson obtained permission to spend the first semester of his graduate studies – autumn of 1955 – at Freiburg University, where Heidegger would be lecturing on Der Satz vom Grund (now GA 10). Richardson had little familiarity with Heidegger’s work at the time, but he was searching for a dissertation topic in metaphysics and knew that Heidegger was caught up in that issue. While attending Heidegger’s lecture course that fall, Richardson became friends with a young Jesuit from Rome, Father Virgilio Fagone, who was one of a dozen or so select participants in Heidegger’s seminar on Hegel’s Logic, which was meeting that semester at Heidegger’s home. It was from the ever enthusiastic Fagone that Richardson first heard of die Kehre, the alleged “reversal” in Heidegger’s thought in the 1930s. This was issue that would become the organizing principle of Richardson’s own interpretation of Heidegger.

One Friday afternoon in the late fall of 1955, Richardson summoned up the courage to approach Heidegger during his office hours (“Well, what can I lose?” he later said. “He can’t resent my naiveté.”) and, in imperfect German, asked his opinion on three possible dissertation topics. Would a comparison of Husserl’s and Heidegger’s phenomenology be advisable? No, said Heidegger, that’s far too large a topic. How about the ontological difference? Another “no,” because Heidegger had much more yet to publish on that. Then what about Seinsdenken, understood as “foundational thought” (das wesentliche Denken) in the later work – would that be a suitable dissertation topic? As Richardson later wrote, Heidegger responded with “a firm Ja.”

But when he returned to Louvain in early 1956, Richardson ran into opposition in the person of his dissertation director. “Are you serious?” asked De Waelhens. “Do you really want to work on that?” His own book, La philosophie de Martin Heidegger (1942), had focused only on Heidegger’s early work, and De Waelhens was convinced that the later Heidegger had abandoned philosophy for something verging on poetry. But with Heidegger’s firm “Yes” backing him up, Richardson persisted and De Waelhens finally agreed to supervise the dissertation. Working steadily for the next three years, partly in Louvain plus a year-and-a-half at a Benedictine convent in the Black Forest, Richardson produced a manuscript of no less than 1,100 typed pages and some 5,000 footnotes, all of which, as he came to see by 1959, “sabotaged” de Waelhens’ interpretation of Heidegger. And yet De Waelhens, in full awareness that such was the case, generously encouraged his student throughout the process, even if he occasionally suggested “un peu de distance, quand même.”

The dissertation completed, Richardson sent Heidegger a 25-page summary of the manuscript, which the philosopher read closely and marked up extensively. In February of 1959, Heidegger invited Richardson to a four-hour follow-up meeting at Heidegger’s home – this was the only extended encounter between the two. With only two minor corrections, the Master approved

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2 William Bole reports Richardson’s recollection of that meeting: “He [Richardson] donned a black overcoat before appearing at Heidegger’s door, as a way of initially hiding his clerical garb. Word had reached Richardson that the thinker’s wife [Elfride Heidegger, a Protestant] had recently turned away a priest friend of Heidegger’s, because she, as a rule, disliked men with Roman collars.” (“Table Talk: A Celebrated Thinker Has Friends to Dinner,” Boston College Magazine, March 2010.)

I can add a further note: Richardson was received at the door by Mrs. Heidegger, and after he had doffed his overcoat, she suggested he also take off his scarf. He resisted (it was concealing his Roman collar), but she insisted on helping him. Upon seeing the collar, she dropped the scarf and walked away, pointing him upstairs to Heidegger’s study.
As Richardson found out the next day, Heidegger telephoned their mutual friend Max Müller after the meeting to marvel that someone finally understood him—and it was an American!

Richardson returned to Louvain, presented the first half of the manuscript to the faculty as his doctoral dissertation, and successfully defended it in the spring of 1960. Invited to apply for the maître agrégé at Louvain, Richardson spent the next two years preparing the final version of his opus magnum, which he successfully defended in 1962 before a panel that include Emmanuel Levinas and Alphonse De Waehlens, who, perhaps still unconvinced about the later Heidegger, opened the proceedings with the quip: “In the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king.” (At least he didn’t quote Matthew 15:14: “If the blind man lead the blind, both will fall into a pit.”)

Following their meeting in 1959 Heidegger had agreed in principle to write a preface to the eventual book, and in April of 1962, when the manuscript was already in press, Heidegger penned his now famous response to two questions from Richardson (about the origins of his Seinsfrage and about die Kehre), while carefully noting at the end of the letter that “you alone bear responsibility” for the work. That text became the Preface to Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought, which appeared in early 1963 (but only after some difficulties stirred up by Hermann Van Breda had been settled).

In his later years, over a glass or two of Scotch, Richardson would recount his disappointment at being denied the possibility of taking a Ph.D. in theology. Upon returning to the States in 1963, he visited his Jesuit superior who had made that decision. Richardson walked into the superior’s office and without further ado, dropped the 764-page book on the man’s desk, saying: “You wanted a philosophy book? Here’s your philosophy book.”

In 1963 Richardson was assigned to teach history of philosophy and natural theology to Jesuit seminarians at Shrub Oak, north of New York City, but after a single, somewhat controversial year (those were the days of the Second Vatican Council, not to mention the Sixties), he was unceremoniously transferred out.

In 1965, following a year's sabbatical, he joined the philosophy department of Fordham University in the Bronx. His seminars on Heidegger, which I was privileged to attend for three years, were extraordinary exercises in close reading and rigorously honed questions posed by a master teacher who often exhausted himself preparing the weekly meetings. He was always harder on himself than he was on any student, but his criticisms, often understated, could be devastating. (His laconic response to my first term paper as he handed it back to me was a single sentence: “Well, if that’s the best you can do, I guess that’s the best you can do.”)

It was during the Fordham years (1965-80) that Richardson deepened his interest in what he called the “philosophical foundations of psychoanalysis,” especially with regard to the human subject, desire, and ethics. In the fall of 1969 he reduced his philosophy teaching at Fordham, first to serve as visiting research scholar at the Austen Riggs Center in Stockbridge, 3

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3 Heidegger suggested that he use Subjektität rather than Subjectivität when discussing Leibniz. Later he suggested that in the subtitle of the book Richardson substitute “Through Phenomenology to Thought” for the original subtitle “From Phenomenology to Thought.”

Massachusetts, and then, from 1970 to 1974, to earn the Certificate in Psychoanalysis from the William Alanson White Institute in New York City. (In a late interview, he remarked that in 1970 “I . . . cut all ties to philosophy.”) Both of those institutions were founded by Erich Fromm, Clara Thompson, and Harry Stack Sullivan, with strong influences from Sándor Ferenczi’s “activist” practice of therapy and Erik Erikson’s ego psychology.

Early in his term as Director of Research at Austen Riggs (1974-1979), and while still teaching at Fordham and practicing psychoanalysis, Richardson discovered the work of Jacques Lacan, whose critique of American ego psychology and adaptational psychoanalysis was well known. Richardson attended Lacan’s 1974 lectures at Yale (24-25 November) and Columbia (1 December) and would frequently remark that he found Lacan “hard as a diamond” and often “absolutely unintelligible.” He decided that to understand what the man was saying, he would have to undertake a second didactic analysis, this time with a Lacanian. In 1978 he met with Lacan in Paris and eventually began analysis with one of Lacan’s associates. Two books emerged from his Lacanian experiences and research, both written with his colleague John P. Muller: Lacan and Language: A Reader’s Guide to the Ecrits (1982; French translation, Ouvrir les Ecrits de Jacques Lacan, 1987) and the co-edited The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading (1988).

In 1980 Richardson (somewhat unhappily) terminated his connection with Fordham University. He was then invited by his close friend Donald Mohan, S.J., to take a position as professor of philosophy at Boston College, where Mohan was president and where his colleagues included Hans Georg Gadamer, Jacques Taminiaux, and eventually Richard Kearney and Jeffrey Blochel. For the next twenty-six years he taught courses, mostly on Heidegger, Lacan, and ethics, and directed dissertations until he retired in 2007.

II

THE WORK

William J. Richardson’s seventy years of scholarship were focused on two essential figures in two distinct fields: Martin Heidegger in philosophy and Jacques Lacan in psychoanalysis. In what follows I discuss only the contributions to Heidegger scholarship made by his book Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought. Richardson continued reading and teaching philosophy right up to his last years, but there was no change in the fundamentals of his interpretation of Heidegger from 1962, when he finished his book, until his death a half-century later. The book was written before the English translation of Sein und Zeit was published in 1962, and so Richardson had to invent his own terms, some of which has not lasted (e.g., “There-being” for Dasein, “mittence” for Geschick, “concern” for Sorge) and some of which are actually wrong (“lighting-process” for Lichtung). That notwithstanding, the book is a vast treasure trove of insights, careful arguments, and conclusions that still hold their own today. I will mention only three issues that may be particularly relevant for contemporary Heidegger scholarship.

http://www.acheronta.org/reportajes/richardson-en.htm

6 At Yale Lacan famously declared “Psychosis is an attempt at rigor. In that sense, I would say that I am psychotic. I am psychotic for the sole reason that I always tried to be rigorous.” Lacan, “Conférences et Entretiens dans des universités nord-américaines,” “Scilicet n° 6/7, 1975, pag. 9.

7 In 1979 he left Austen Riggs. In the fall of that year he delivered the Martin D’Arcy lectures at Oxford.
1. **The unity of Heidegger’s thought.** Richardson was the first to demonstrate the undivided unity and continuity of Heidegger’s thought from *Sein und Zeit* up through the 1950’s. When Richardson began writing his book in 1956, Heidegger was still widely and wrongly thought of as an existentialist, despite the fact that post-war publications such as *Humanismusbrief* (1947) and *Holzwege* (1950) revealed a very different orientation and set of interests. By a meticulous reading of all Heidegger’s available publications Richardson demonstrated that there were not “two” Heideggers but only one, who from beginning to end was focused with laser-like precision on a single topic: the Open (*das Offene, die Lichtung*). The Open is the finite, dynamic “space” that both requires and allows us to understand things only discursively, only in terms of their Anwesen, i.e., how and as what they are currently meaningful. The Open is what is only formally indicated by such heuristic terms as das Sein als solches, das Wesen des Seins, die Wahrheit des Seins, and (sometimes) das Seyn.

Richardson used the shorthand phrase “Heidegger I” and “Heidegger II” to stand for Heidegger’s earlier and later work. The early project (1927 to ca. 1932) was phenomenological and was focused on *Dasein* as *Transzendent*. But some scholars mistakenly think “Heidegger II” stands for a quite different project. They allege that the later Heidegger abandoned phenomenology and *Transzendent* for a purely “ontological” project focused on *Sein* as an active force, entirely independent of *Dasein*, which *sua sponte* (and inexplicably) reveals itself to and conceals itself from *Dasein*. Richardson, however, correctly argued for the unity of Heidegger’s single phenomenological project, indivisibly focused on the single issue of the Open. In the climactic closing pages of his book Richardson argued that Heidegger’s later work was a “retrieval” of the earlier work: it brought to light what had already been intended in *Sein und Zeit* but had not been fully developed there. Richardson’s conclusion was that “all of the essential elements of the existential analysis of *SZ* can be disengaged from Heidegger II,”8 to which one may add: And all the essential elements of Heidegger II can be found in *nuce* in Heidegger I.

2. **Da-sein, die Lichtung, and Ereignis.** Richardson translated *Dasein* with the very literal term “There-being,” which doesn’t seem to say much. However, in clarifying the “There” (*Da*) of There-being, Richardson insisted on the important distinction, often overlooked in subsequent scholarship, between the existentiel and the existential dimensions of *Dasein*. The first (-iel) refers to any particular person, singular or plural: you, me, us, them. The second (-ial) refers to the ontological structure, the essence, of any and all of us. Heidegger called the human essence *Existenz*, which Richardson intentionally misspelled and hyphenated as “ek-sistence” to emphasize its etymology. (I prefer to write it as “ex-sistence.”) *Sistere*, like its Greek counterpart ἵστημι, is a causative verb. It doesn’t mean “to stand” but “to make something/someone stand.” Ex-sistence is a priori made-to-stand (*sistere*) out (ex-) among things but also beyond them, into their possible meanings.

Ex-sistence is not a sub-ject but an e-ject, thrown “outside” with no “inside,” and its outsideness is what Heidegger called the “world,” the open field of possible meaning (*Bedeutsamkeit*).9 For Richardson the “There” (*Da*) of There-being is the Open. Hence, when he occasionally writes that, in *Sein und Zeit, Dasein* “projects” the Open/clearing/world, he is

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8 Heidegger’s own position, early and late, is articulated at SZ 152.11-2; 183.29-30; 193.31-32; and 212. 4-5; GA 65: 254.22-23 (cf. ibid., 263.28-29 and 264.1-2); GA 66: 138.32 and 139.18; GA 73, 1: 642.28–29, etc.

9 Heidegger: *Through Phenomenology to Thought*, 625.32-34.

10 See SZ 162.28-28 with GA 2: 216; note a. Heidegger referred implicitly to SZ I.1 as his “doctrine of meaning” (*Bedeutungslehre: SZ* 166.9–10). See also GA 64: 24.4–7.
not referring to an existentiel act whereby some individual personally and spontaneously “projects open” the Open. Rather, it means that our ex-sistential structure is always already thrown open as the clearing.

But Heidegger asks a further question: “Woher aber und wie gibt es die Lichtung?” What is responsible for (i.e., what “gives” or “sends”) the Open? In 1927 his answer was die Geworfenheit des Da-seins, read as Zeitlichkeit. But beginning in 1936 Heidegger reinscribed that term as das Ereignis des Da-seins, the structural ap-propri-ation of ex-sistence whereby it has always already been brought-ad-proprium, “into its own” as the Open. He goes so far as to say that ex-sistence itself, qua ereignet, is what “gives” the Open:

das Dasein ist das je vereinzelte “es,” das gibt; das ermöglicht und ist das “es gibt.”

Richardson did not analyze Ereignis at great length in his book, but contra all reification of a hypostasized “It” that somehow “gives” Sein to There-being, it is clear that There-being itself, as ap-propriated, is what’s responsible for the openness of the Open.

3. Die Kehre. As we noted, at the core of Richardson’s book lies die Kehre, but in Heidegger’s texts the term is used in at least three senses, only one of which is Heidegger’s proper sense of the term. Recall that the final goal of Heidegger’s work was not das Sein but what makes possible (ermöglicht) das Sein i.e., that because of which there is Sein at all. And that is “the open space” (das Offene, die Lichtung, das Da) that is always already drawn out, stretched out, pulled out, thrown out ahead of itself (angezogen, erstreckt, ereignet, geworfen, etc.) as the clearing.

The first (but not proper) sense of die Kehre, which Heidegger himself employed at least twice, refers to the progression that was already programmed into Sein und Zeit from the start: the shift of attention from SZ I.1-2 (the published part of the book) to SZ I.3, “Zeit und Sein,” which was never published in its original form but which Heidegger worked out in a different form over the next thirty years. The Kehre in this derived sense consists in the natural development of the project of Sein und Zeit: the programmed shift of focus from Dasein (SZ I.1-2) to Da-sein (SZ I.3), i.e., from (1) how the Open is opened up, to (2) how the Open determines the significance of everything we encounter within it.

A second sense of die Kehre (but still not the proper sense) is Heidegger’s change of language, style, and approach beginning around 1936. This is what Heidegger himself called die Wandlung des Denkens: not a change of his focal topic but a change in how he thought about and articulated that topic. As we mentioned, instead of speaking of ex-sistence as thrown-open (geworfen), he began speaking of it as always already brought-ad-proprium (ereignet), thrown into its essence as die Lichtung. The thrown-open clearing of the early Heidegger = the appropriated clearing of his later work: die ereignete Lichtung. Richardson mistakenly took this Wandlung des Denkens to be the proper meaning of die Kehre, but

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11 GA 14: 90.3.
12 Ereignis as a reinscription of Geworfenheit: GA 65:34.8–9; 239.5; 252.23–25; 322.7–8 with SZ 325.37; GA 9: 377, note d; GA 73, 1: 642.28-29; etc.
13 GA 73, 1: 642.28–29.
14 GA 26: 201.29 = 158.30. In 1937–1938: GA 45: 47.18 and .20; and 214.23–24.
15 GA 71: 211.9.
nonetheless he was clear that there was no dichotomy between Heidegger I and Heidegger II but only continuity. The *die ereignete Lichtung* remained his single topic throughout.

The third and *proper* sense of *die Kehre* runs contrary to what many scholars believe (cf. GA 65: 407.7–12). As Heidegger wrote to Richardson in 1962, *die Kehre* in its proper sense was not some alleged break from the early phenomenological project, and it certainly was not a change in Heidegger’s focal topic.\(^\text{16}\) Nor is *die Kehre* in its proper sense a dateable event that occurred in Heidegger’s career during the 1930’s. In fact, it never “happened” at all: there is no “before and after the Kehre.”\(^\text{17}\) Rather, the Kehre is the existential structure of existence itself, the ever-operative back-and-forth (*kehrige*) sameness of existence and the clearing, which Heidegger called *die Gegenschwung*. Therefore, he says, one shouldn’t speak of a “relation” between *Dasein* and the Open. Rather, the so-called “relation” is the Open itself; and the essence of human beings is this very “relation.”

Der Bezug ist jedoch nicht zwischen das Seyn und den Menschen eingespannt. ... Der Bezug ist das Seyn selbst [= das Offene, die Lichtung], und das Menschenwesen ist der selbe Bezug.\(^\text{18}\)

These three issues in their sameness – *Dasein, die Lichtung, die Kehre* – are what constitute the unity and continuity of Heidegger’s thought. There is no Super-Sein in Heidegger’s work, something that he himself derided as *ein phantastisches Weltwesen*.\(^\text{19}\) In fact, Heidegger never got beyond *Existenz*, the essence of human beings; nor did he need to; nor could he have done so if he had wanted to.

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In the last twenty-five years William J. Richardson’s *Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought* has not been cited as much or read as attentively as it was in the twenty-five years following its publication. That notwithstanding, it remains a fundamental and momentous achievement that formed a generation of scholars, set a very high bar for Heidegger scholarship, and still remains to be mined for its enduring insights.

And what about Richardson the man, the mentor from whom so many of us learned, the friend whom so many of us loved? Of him, as of Socrates, we may say,

Of those whom we have known, he was the best, the wisest, the most just.*

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\[\text{16}\] GA 14: 149.29-310  
\[\text{17}\] GA 11. 151.14-15  
\[\text{18}\] GA 73, 1: 790.5–8.  
\[\text{19}\] GA 9: 442.21 = 334.21.