The contemporary philosopher Richard Rorty was a colleague of yours for many years, and a subject of your poem “Reading Rorty and Paul Celan One Morning in Early June” (in Chichamaga (1995)). Rorty wrote about the “language turn” in philosophy and argued, I think, that language constructs our world. Did you ever think, well, maybe he has a point? There’s a place where I think everybody’s right about everything, particularly about language. But the idea that the world is made of language and not objects is something that’s foreign to my sensibilities. Like all theory, like all philosophy, it’s an interesting position and an interesting post. Just like the theory of the language poets is interesting in theory, but in practice it’s confetti, for me anyhow.

Did you ever talk about these issues with Rorty? Dick was a man of few words out loud. But he could write like a dream, and he obviously was one of the great philosophers of our time. I think I only stood next to him two moments. My favorite Rorty moment was early on when both of us had younger children—they must have been 13 and 14. We went to a Fourth of July function at Jack Levinson’s house, and the kids were playing out in the yard. I can’t remember whether I was sitting on the steps and Dick came up and sat down next to me, or whether Dick was on the steps. But I said, Hi, and he said, Hi, and that was it for a half hour. For half an hour. And about half way through—no, after about five minutes, I guess, you know, it’s very uncomfortable not to speak—I suddenly understood that there are those of us who are happiest when we can sit next to somebody and not feel constrained to make small talk. Dick had very little small talk and a lot of large talk. Let me say one other thing about Dick. He had a lot to say about chicken sexing.

Chicken sexing is—the little chickens, when you determine whether they’re male or female. He wrote about it one time. This is what I’m going to do when I retire. Write about chicken sexing?

No, be a chicken sexer. You can’t be taught how to be a chicken sexer. You have to know. People are born chicken sexers or they’re not chicken sexers. I have this old-fashioned belief that anybody can learn to write poems, but a true poet really is born. There’s some kind of gene—just like a chicken sexer, a poet has some kind of special gene that makes him move toward certain paths as a poet like the Druids did, like the shamans did.

Sunday seems to come up a lot in your poems.

Sunday, I’ve noticed it—talking about the Rorty poem, it’s Sunday, in the last line. I used to write on Sundays a lot—always wrote on Sundays, Sunday mornings—and I tend to be quite open about what’s around me when I write. I mention the day of the week, particularly in the journals, the whole point of it was to try to make something serious out of the quotidian.

In an interview with David Remnick many years ago you said the greatest burden you’d felt as a poet was getting a letter from a young man who’d been to one of your readings and had decided to give up Christianity because he felt you had thought so carefully about your own “exposure to Christianity” and “had come to such a reasoned renunciation of it.” Have you ever again had someone read your poems and say, and this has completely changed my own thinking? I have, but they have been the opposite of that young man. They have said your poems have been very helpful and so on. Which is a lot easier to read, although I guess the young man—well he was a young man, he’s probably gone back to the Lord by now—at least I got his attention.

When you started writing, your fascination with spiritual issues struck many readers as a little bit odd, certainly not in the mainstream. It still is.

In the past decade or so, a number of poets one wouldn’t think of as religious poets started writing about spiritual issues. Jorie Graham had some spiritually infused poems, for instance, as did Edward Hirsch. Do you see this as a trend in American verse? I know what you’re talking about; there seem to be more people writing about God now, out front, or up front, than there were before. I don’t know if it’s a trend or not, but each man his own dog. I don’t know. Maybe they just tried it that one time and now they don’t do it. Ed Hirsch seems to be writing about his father all the time now, and Jorie is writing about the environment. Both of which have spiritual connections, so I don’t know.

Do you read the Bible? No, I do not, no.

And do you don’t dip into . . . I read the Nag Hammadi. That’s where an awful lot of my references come from. I read almost all of that entire book, which is one of the two things sitting on my table there.

Why the Nag Hammadi?

The Nag Hammadi manuscripts were so very new to me, and non-canonical, and endlessly fascinating in their differences, that I just kept on reading them and found them very powerful from beginning to end. I had read the canonical gospels before, but this was practically new stuff. I haven’t read the Bible in many years, but I did—I have a lot of Bibles over there, family Bibles stacked up. I was raised in the church, in the Episcopal Church, I went to Presbyterian schools and all of that, but I fell away. But it didn’t fall away, obviously, it stayed with me.

Did you fall away before your mother died? Or was it after?

I was about 16 or 17.

And was she very upset by that?

I don’t think so, I don’t know. We never talked about it. She was the one in the family that was the most churchgoing. My father was not a churchgoer. My son is very much a churchgoer. It just skipped a generation, I guess.

Several of the poems in Sestets, such as “The Gospel of Yours Truly,” seem to echo John Berryman’s “Eleven Addresses to the Lord.”

There’s one that has a direct reference to Berryman—either lifting or reference or Laurdering or something else.

And Sestets also echoes Stevens in several places—often undoing Stevens. Both Berryman and Stevens became believers—or at least are thought to have become believers—in their final years, after a lifetime of rejecting God. Yes.

Are you afraid that might happen to you?

I’m not afraid. I would accept it if it happened, I guess. I don’t think it will. But you never know. I mean, I’m pretty old now—I’m 74, so it had better hurry up.