



Letter to My Readers

Alan Jenkins

DESPITE EVIDENCE to the contrary, there for all to see at poetry readings and – occasionally, in the days when this wasn't unheard of – in letters sent to me c/o my publisher, I've always had great difficulty believing you existed: you, my gentle, or not so gentle, readers. Not that it seemed so impossible that anyone would want to read my poems — *I* certainly wanted someone to, and hoped they would: why have them published otherwise?

But from that desire and that hope to the idea that you, whoever you are, might actually buy a book of mine (whichever one it happened to be), take it home and read it, was — a leap too far: it wasn't *realistic*.

Well, I know that respectable and sometimes even surprising numbers of you did so, and some of you, perhaps, many times over. Can I even dare to hope that somewhere out there are readers with all my volumes, from the very first in 1988 to the most recent, five years ago, sitting on their bookshelves? That having – how can I put this? – got something out of the one you read first, you were drawn back by the next, or drawn to an earlier volume you hadn't noticed when it came out? Or perhaps, flicking through the book pages in your weekend paper, you liked the sound of what a reviewer had said about my latest work? Or on the contrary, *disliked* the sound of it so much you just had to see for yourself?

Fine with me, either way. And just as fine if, for you, I'm the bloke who wrote a poem that happened to catch your eye in a magazine or an



anthology or, these days, on a website — and nothing more. Because, for all that it must look like the most spectacular vanity to be talking this way to you, whoever and wherever you are, it isn't, for me, about shoring up my ego, any more than writing poems is.

Does that mean I'm not endlessly curious about *what* you find in my poems — or poem? No. But I know that, just as I had very little influence on why or how you came to be reading something of mine in the first place, I can't expect to dictate what you take away from it — that's out of my control, and was, the moment I finished working on it and sent it off to be published. (Though, as the French poet Paul Valéry said, a poem is never finished, only abandoned.) And that's fine too.

Do I hope you find – or found – at least some of the things I worked hard to put into it? Yes, of course. But I'm also perfectly happy if you see things that I didn't put there, or didn't *know* I was putting there. We are all of us at the mercy of our unconscious, never more so than when we put words on paper, or on a screen. (Ever since Freud, we've been inclined to believe that dreams, and the unconscious generally, come from below — but I prefer the medieval belief that dreams, like visions, come from above. Take your pick!) My poems have, I think – and for what it's worth – changed rather a lot since I started writing them; they've become clearer, less ragged, more 'joined up', more coherent, if you like. To those of you who preferred them when I started: sorry about that. And to everyone who has enjoyed them at any time: I'm sorry they weren't better, and a huge thank you!