**Explain why the poetry of Brendan Kennelly did or did not appeal to you.**

The poetry of Brendan Kennelly does appeal to me, and there are a number of reasons for this. His work is immediately accessible: he uses colloquial language, which allows more people to read and enjoy his poetry, and he explores universal themes, such as love and family, which are of interest to us all. Most of his poems are about urban and rural life, relationships or history. On a deeper level, it can also be said that Kennelly comments on the different stages of our lives. His work covers the beginnings and endings, and all that is in between, of his relationships with the people he loved and, as well as those he read about in history. More than this, though, he writes with great innovation, variety and creativity. His work includes sonnets, free-verse poems and translations. The appeal of his poetry to me is quite clear, and a pleasure to expand on with these poems in particular: “Begin”, “Bread”, “Oliver to his Brother”, “The Soul’s Loneliness”, and “A Great Day”.

‘Begin’ feels like an appropriate poem to discuss in order to start my explanation of why Kennelly’s poetry appeals to me. This free-verse poem considers the theme of new starts in life and it showcases many of the qualities I have come to appreciate in his work. He uses personification to conjure an atmosphere of that is rich with possibilities: he writes of the day beginning with the “summoning birds” and the “roar of morning traffic” along Dublin’s Grand Canal. His work is appealing because he can sum up a place with a few well-chosen words and specific locations – Kennelly has largely lived between Kerry and Dublin, and his work reflects these diverse but related experiences as well as that, he excels as extracting pleasure from the apparently mundane: he uses concise imagery to show readers the wonder of “unknown faces”, “sudden rain”, “seagulls foraging for bread” and “couples sharing a sunny secret”. These everyday images contrast appealingly with the more profound side of the poem. What has a lasting appeal to me is his message. Kennelly’s message is stark yet encouraging in its tone of delivery: Life is finite, live while it lasts. Because we could die at any moment, we should embrace our existence as ‘something that will not acknowledge conclusion', that ‘insists that we forever begin'. In short, the poet rephrases the modern notion that we should dream as if we will live forever and live as if we will die today; we must continue to ‘begin’, ‘forever’

‘Bread’ is another of Kennelly’s poems that appeals to me and it is arguably more traditionally poetic in terms of its intention and the thought processes behind it. However, its delivery and style is refreshing, deceptively simple, and new. ‘Bread’ is what the speaker becomes through the help and love of an unknown ‘her’. What is so interesting about this poem to me is that the narrator evolves and grows from beginning to end. First, we learn of the narrator’s somewhat violent origins – ‘Someone else cut off my head’ – albeit in the beautiful setting of ‘a golden field’. Soon after we are immersed in the love experienced by the speaker at ‘her’ hands, ‘I am re-created / By her fingers.’ This woman’s (indeed the poet’s) use of her ‘fingers’ implies that this is a more careful, deliberate process, one requiring skill and dexterity, than that of the narrator’s conception. The lines that follow reveal it is a loving act – ‘Moulding is more delicate / Than a first kiss’ – one the narrator deems an act of love. Subsequently, this poem’s motif of love and care is compounded by its closing triplet: Yet I am nothing till / She runs her fingers through me / And shapes me with her skill. From these lines, I infer that ‘her’ baking is Kennelly’s metaphor for the nourishing, creative power and effect that love’s presence and/or a loving relationship has on him in his own life, on us all. I believe the speaker’s feeling that they are ‘nothing’ in comparison with what ‘she’ makes them into is too strong and full of sentiment to be confined to this poem’s literal meaning. It must speak of a loving relationship.

Alternately, a poem that is also loving, kind-hearted and sincere on its surface but that is much more ominous and sinister in its tone is ‘Oliver to His Brother’. In it, Kennelly adopts the voice and persona of arguably the most reviled figure in Irish history, Oliver Cromwell. Where ‘Bread’ reads as a more direct address by the speaker of his love (and reliance on it), this poem is intended as the words of a letter written by Cromwell to his brother, whom he has entrusted to care for his children while he quells the rebellious forces of Southern England before attending to Ireland’s. What I find appealing in this poem is the unexpected approach Kennelly takes – Cromwell is largely associated with the plantations of the 17th century, and the injustices of the Penal Laws. However, Kennelly turns popular perception on its head when he writes of the British military leader as more than the sum of his possession; he was also a father and an uncle. Once we have ingested the fact that the speaker is Oliver Cromwell, this poem’s opening reads as a surprise. To Kennelly’s credit as a writer, we encounter Cromwell the family man, someone enquiring considerately about his brother’s ‘welfare’ and that of his children, attempting to ensure that his family prospers in his absence: ‘Loving brother, I am glad to hear of your welfare / And that our children have so much leisure / They can travel far to eat cherries.’ However, with the introduction of Cromwell’s son, whom he has sent from him likely due to the risk of life lived by his father’s side, the tone and content of Cromwell’s letter becomes more sinister: ‘I have delivered my son up to you’; ‘delivered’ having the religious overtones of saved/rescued (‘Deliver us from evil…’). We also infer that Cromwell’s son is in ‘need’ of caring advice – ‘I hope you counsel him; he will need it’ – and that the young man may have been adversely affected by his experiences alongside his father – ‘I choose to believe he believes what you say.’ Here, Cromwell’s choosing ‘to believe’ is indicative of his ability to shut himself off from his emotions and any sense he of wrong-doing he may have, something we experience much more explicitly later in the poem. From what we know of Cromwell’s actions, as yet uncommitted in ‘Oliver to…’, we experience a strong sense of dramatic irony, and Catholic Ireland’s impending doom. Where the speaker of ‘Dear Autumn Girl’ longs for the day his new baby is born, here Cromwell is quietly preparing himself to wreak murderous havoc on a nation: ‘I take not kindly to rebels.’Cromwell proceeds to outline recent events in the South with a calm yet chilling clarity:

*Today, in Burford Churchyard, Cornet Thompson*

*Was led to the place of execution.*

*He asked for prayers, got them, died well.*

*(…)*

*Men die their different ways*

While one could reasonably argue that the lines ‘Today…’ as far as ‘chilled into his pride’ are merely a rational man’s account of three executions, ‘Men die their different ways’ is too passive a philosophy to be anything but a chilling indication of the speaker’s cruel and callous nature. After all, these men were Cromwell’s countrymen.

Subsequently Cromwell compares the men dying to his daughter’s penchant for eating cherries, his logic being that death during the war he has taken responsibility for and cherry-eating are a fact of life, that both are equally integral. He concludes with the bone-freezing, ambiguous-to-no-one revelation of ‘I have work to do in Ireland.’ Executions have become his job to ensure; nothing more.

The theme of solitude is developed in ‘The Soul’s Loneliness’. Capital letters are absent from the title and the start of each line; a hushed atmosphere is established with these subtle omissions. Kennelly detects the loneliness of the soul in the “ticking of the clock”; he can see it “in the shine / of an Eason’s plastic bag”; he can “touch it in the tree I call / Christ there outside my window.” His use of the senses to evoke such an abstract idea appeals to me in a thought-provoking way; it’s an approach he returns to in several poems. Added to this is the distinctive spiritual imagery he uses to capture the mood of reflection and melancholy. The speaker finishes his journey to understand the soul’s loneliness “searching the floor / for a definition of grace / or a trace of yourself I’ve never noticed before. Here, rhyme offers readers a sense of conclusion; I was glad it did not offer a clear, simplified answer to the question of how to cope with loneliness – rather this poem appeals to me because it invites me to consider the nature of its title.

Breaking away from this theme of solitude and returning once again to love and positivity we turn, finally, to “A Great Day”. Kennelly is not just a poet with his eye on daily life. He has a subtle way of detailing extremities of relationships that challenges and moves me. In “A Great Day”, he retells the story of a wedding, using imagery that is familiar but is presented in a refreshing way. The bride was “all in white” and the groom was “dickied up in blue”. Once more we see his preference for informal language – it seems to reflect what is at once a formal though quite joyous day. Repetition is a major feature in this work – the title appears three times, offering the poem a coherence that suggests the day itself went according to plan. However, the poem ends with an intimation of the solitude of human life – another distinguishing feature of his work. The newlyweds leave on a train for their honeymoon, and as they do: “A tide of thoughts flowed in her head, / In his head”. This metaphor appeals to me because it was simple and unexpected – in two lines a poem about a wedding seemed to become about the complexities of relationships.

In conclusion, Kennelly’s poetry held instant appeal for me – it is accessible and memorable. However, there is a depth to his work that demands careful consideration. He is a poet for all stages of life and relationships. There are lessons here on life and death, and all that is in between along side a nod to writers past and some Irish history. In terms of both style and content, then, he is a poet who offers readers much to reflect on.