Poetry Analysis – Analysis of the use of imagery in the poem ‘Try to Praise the Mutilated World’ by Adam Zagajewski

In this poem, University of Houston professor Adam Zagajewski is trying to convey beauty in ‘reality’ or tragedy. The poem was published in The New Yorker just after the September 11 tragedy that occurred in NYC. The theme of the poem greatly resonated with the reader’s emotions and experiences at that point in time. Art, especially poetry is like a balm on broken hearts and troubled minds. It brings in an element of color and beauty in a ‘reality’ otherwise wrought with strife and chaos.

“Try to Praise the Mutilated World”! The title of the poem opens with elements of imagery. Notice how the author subtly uses the word ‘try’ at the beginning of the title. The statement seems more like a gentle plea, a provocation on the part of the author toward victims and people affected by the tragedy. “Praise the Mutilated World” – signifies how we ought to discover beauty amidst the myriad occurrences, so tragic and mutilating, not only of environments and systems, but also of the fabric of inner harmony. There is an innate optimism and forbearance in the theme of the title. Zagajewski talks about ‘praise’ and not mere tolerance. This implies that there is a need to transcend circumstances, and through transcendence peace is found, no matter how seemingly damaged or ‘mutilated’ the circumstances or environment might seem.

“Remember June’s long days, 
and wild strawberries, drops of wine, the dew. 
The nettles that methodically overgrow 
the abandoned homesteads of exiles. 
You must praise the mutilated world.”

There is an allusion to “June’s ‘long’ days” transporting one to a moment in the past, when there was leisure and a sense of lightheartedness. An almost sensual image is being painted, wherein ‘wild strawberries, drops of wine, the dew’ all combine to create an experience of beauty and extravagant indulgence in life’s finer aspects. The tone is turns slightly morose, where there is a reference to ‘nettles that methodically overgrow’. Nettles are flowering plants, but also have stinging hairs on their stems. While the nettle produces something as beautiful as a flower, it also has the hidden potential of killing and destruction. There is an implication here that, the world, no matter how ‘toxic’ is filled with pockets of ‘flowers’ and it is up to us to identify and focus on that which is beautiful in the world. The repetition of the title here has an undertone of an instruction.

“You watched the stylish yachts and ships; 
one of them had a long trip ahead of it, 
while salty oblivion awaited others. 
You’ve seen the refugees heading nowhere, 
you’ve heard the executioners sing joyfully. 
You should praise the mutilated world.”

This verse indicates the dualities, the opposites, the inseparable tragedy in luxury. “...stylish yachts and ships” are images used to either explain themselves in all their opulence, or represent the people in
fancy suits and offices in the WTC, just before the 9/11 tragedy took place. The fruity theme of the first stanza is contrasting the second verse wherein a suggestion of the obsolete and transient nature of luxury is being emphasized. "...salty oblivion" – an indication of the future of the victims of war and destruction. This is a figurative description of the uncertainty innate in the lives of refugees and people inflicted by the effects of the "mutilated world". "...executioners sing joyfully" – this symbolizes the epitome of obnoxiousness that the human mind has displayed in the last century. In spite of all this obscenity and incredible injustice, “You SHOULD praise the mutilated world”. This is an Order!

“Remember the moments when we were together
in a white room and the curtain fluttered.
Return in thought to the concert where music flared.
You gathered acorns in the park in autumn
and leaves eddied over the earth’s scars.
Praise the mutilated world
and the gray feather a thrush lost,
and the gentle light that strays and vanishes
and returns.”

“…..in a white room and the curtain fluttered”! A reference to times in the past, when there was love (moments when we were together). The room as white indicates the purity and simplicity of life when it was still peaceful, still joyous, through the presence of simple moments being spent in the company of those we love. “Return in thought to the concert where music flared”! Wow! This is a beautiful expression of the healing power of imagination and sweet memories. There is always a joy in living, when ‘music flares’ and the accordions sound to the rhythm of a serene life – both inward and out. In times of strife, amidst the din of the ‘mutilated world’, one must revisit these memories which motivate us to move on in spite of the weighing burden of tragic circumstances. “….. leaves eddied over the earth’s scars” – the imagery of autumn leaves circling the earth’s ‘scars’ leaves us feeling that every wound has the scope of healing. Scars represent character, giving life a certain depth and our actions a certain meaning. “...gentle light that strays and vanishes and returns”- there is always a light, and it comes and goes. This light is solace in times of strife. Ultimately, this is a light of love, of consciousness that appears in spurts, and ultimately has to return. Every incident, good and bad, is like the dip and rise of waves in the ocean. They come and go, and hence, we MUST praise the mutilated world.