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## ‘The Sweet Pain of Life’ - Dancing Metaphysical Longing: A Theological Reading of Matthew Bourne’s *Swan Lake*

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### Abstract

The performing arts offer opportunities for the creative representation of spiritual and moral values and serve an important function in contemporary culture. Dance, and in particular ballet, has the potential through its somatic dynamics centred around graceful movement and stylised gesture, to offer an alluring spectacle of beauty and value to any audience. What we offer in this article is a philosophical, theological and spiritual reading of Matthew Bourne’s 2018 production of *Swan Lake*. The dance revolves around the longing of one male swan for another and the obstacles they encounter due to their desire. We argue that this work is important, not because of its homoerotic appeal, but because it offers a portrayal of universal, spiritual longing as an analogue to, and constituent of, sexual erotic yearning. Since this religious and transcendent approach to sexual love is found in Platonic, Biblical and other theological sources, we interpret the dance through these philosophical and religious lenses, but freely admit that it takes a certain purifying of the eye of the soul (as ascetics have suggested throughout the ages) to interpret the dance in this manner.

**Keywords:** dance, longing, transcendence, Plato, Song of Songs, wound



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## 1. Introduction

The performing arts have always and continue to explore moral and spiritual themes and are now widely regarded as having the potential to increase the health and well-being of those caught up in their dynamics. Dance, and in particular ballet, uses the distinctive features of somatic gracefulness, especially through movement and gesture, to allure audiences into representations of beauty, goodness and truth. We highlight in this article how Matthew Bourne's celebratory 2018 production of *Swan Lake* does just this by centring our discussion around the theme of *longing*, a key theme in theological and spiritual discourse. Although the work became known for the director's casting of the swans as male, and for their appearance – toned, semi-naked bodies, whitened plumed with black striped foreheads – we argue that what significantly drives the narrative is the Platonic and religious desire for beauty and value. Thus, although some critics might emphasize homoeroticism as the definitive characteristic of the work, we take a different hermeneutic, a theological one, to suggest that metaphysical desire is a solid foundation on which to appreciate the dance. Our textual choice to elucidate this dimension is the Biblical *Song of Songs*, an erotic love story which figures God's love for humanity and vice versa. The work suggests that appreciating the depth and importance of our own longing for the transcendent is best understood by reflecting on our own erotic impulses and drives – our need to become whole by loving, sexual union with a reciprocal Other. From a Biblical perspective, sexual union participates in divine union and therefore there is an inseparable entanglement. We also draw from the writings of Plato and the contemporary Trappist monk, Erik Varden, to make our case and to secure a final point that metaphysical and erotic, sexual longing are constituent features of who we are as human beings and one possible means towards transcendent experience.

## 2. Swan Like as a Performative Act of Love

Before enunciating our argument about longing, we need to say a little about our chosen art form - the ballet, *Swan Lake*. This dance was choreographed by Matthew Bourne and performed by professional dancers in his New Adventures Dance Company and they were artists, we contend, intent on creating a new picture of love, centred around the themes of longing and desire. Through their refined craft and the audience's willingness to suspend their disbelief upon the curtain rising, onlookers are invited to engage with a *performance of desire*. This sense of love is pure, tragic, uplifting and moving and the dancers enact this theatrical dynamic through the graceful movement of their bodies attuned to Tchaikovsky's musical score. The appeal of this particular version of *Swan Lake* in postmodern society is that the story being told holds up a mirror to life, while at the same time, has the potential to reflect back to the audience their moral inadequacies, or at least allows them time to reflect upon their biases or injustices, aspects to correct upon re-engagement with life after the performance. The ballet dancers are expert in creating this illusion and challenge for an audience.

But there was another distinctive feature to this production – the representation of *male* swans. As an artist and choreographer, Bourne was intrigued back in the early 1990s with the idea of a *male* swan, 'I was wondering what a gender change would do to the story. He continued 'the idea of a male swan, powerful, wild and dangerous, started to make a lot of sense to me'. In 1995 when Bourne's *Swan Lake* was first performed, he said, 'nobody could imagine what a dancing male swan looked like. So that first appearance of Adam Cooper (lead ballet dancer) was really the shock of the production. He was a wild, lyrical, menacing and totally masculine creature' (Bourne, 2010; Lowry, 2018). Clearly, there is a fleshy, corporeal reality to performing ballet which the dancer feels intensely and negotiates with his own body over the course of his career (Midgelow, 2015). Woodward (1977) points to some misconceptions of the male ballet dancer in society, related to confused sexual identities, essentially contesting the notion that ballet dancers are 'gay, effeminate, 'soft' homosexuals' – all suggesting weakness for lack of 'manliness' (1977, 287). His comments may be a feature of prejudice during and preceding the 1970s that may indeed still linger today.

However, Bourne's male swans have rather crushed that chronic and damaging image. As he states, 'It was key to making a new *Swan Lake*, one that could possibly wipe away those powerful images of the [female] ballerina swan that were so embedded in the psyche of dance lovers and even the wider public (Lowry, 2018, 9). It is true that the dancers' appearance might stir lustful feelings for some in the audience during moments of their watching and indeed, this may be part of the shock, delight and joy of seeing this ballet performed in this particular way, but this does *not* mean it is an erotic dance performed simply for sexual thrills or gratification. Semi-naked *men of longing*, flexing their beautiful bodies in poise and balance, while asserting their dominance in a powerful, but sensitive show of love, is the central feature of the dance we wish to defend. Legitimate desire is here made visible through the graceful movement of men's bodies and their fleshy physicality. Our aim is to highlight how an appreciation of a story of love through disciplined and spiritual, rather than lustful eyes, can come about by watching this remarkable ballet.<sup>1</sup>

## 3. Philosophies of Longing

Plato expounds his understanding of longing and love in the *Symposium*. He describes the nature of love as always being in pursuit of happiness, is never possessed in itself and has 'need as a constant companion' (Plato, 2008, Sym,

203d). This 'going after things of beauty and value' (Sym, 203d) is done with 'ingenuity' (Sym, 203d). Plato's notion of Eros, therefore, signifies a dynamic movement of longing from one state of being to another. It highlights the traversing from the mundane to the transcendent experience of goodness, beauty and happiness. Mellor and Shilling write, '... the Ancient Greek concern with the desires and longings of erotic love highlighted the capacity of these experiences to make life profoundly and even transcendently meaningful for individuals' (2014, 114). Dalton comments about this movement, '...Diotima accounts for Eros as anything but a placid and peaceful middle ground. ... It is the very principle of movement, of movement away from the ugly, the base and temporal and towards the beautiful, the good and the divine' (2009, 32). This attraction to beauty is the human response to the visible, physical form of a person's immortal soul, revealed to us sensuously in this world. The undeniable, transitional movement of love towards the beautiful and towards union reflects that Eros is somehow rooted in humanity's very nature. The lover longs for and goes in search of the beloved, like the bride in the *Song of Songs*, wandering the streets of the city, desperate to find the one she loves. Eros is the crossing, the uniting movement from one pole of experience to another; Plato describes this as a journey from homelessness and alienation towards happiness. This traversing does not involve a return to that which has been lost in the mundane world - a return to a feeling of being at home - but rather the pursuit of something wholly different to what one has experienced before. It may however, in its pursuit, be inexorably attached to that end of feeling at home once again. Eros, thus, is personalized as a *daemon*, as a messenger between the mortal and the divine and exhibits a presence (Dalton, 2007, 32). It is forever striving after and longing for the beautiful and the fullness of life. However, in the *Symposium* Eros or love, is denied its definitive fulfilment. It is always essentially in motion, 'a vagrant, with tough, dry skin and no shoes on his feet' and he takes after his father 'always weaving some stratagem, desirous and competent of wisdom' (Sym, 203c-e).

Plato believed that for the blossoming of erotic love to occur (as opposed to sexual craving which is animal-like), selfish desire itself must be discarded, so that love can be pure and moral. For this philosopher, longing for beauty is a constituent feature of being human and this striving for a mode of purified love (comparable to the practice of philosophy itself), is a connection with a transcendent reality, one step on the way to spiritual fulfilment which occurs only 'with the final release of the soul into that world of Ideas from which it descended and in which it has its eternal home' (Scruton, 2001, 1-2). But the legitimate starting point for this is the perception of beauty. The widely acclaimed short story about this type of longing for beauty which leads to spiritual transcendence is Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (1988). As Aschenbach longs for a glimpse of Tadzio, an image of physical beauty, his half-awake state conjures up a picture of Socrates advising Phaedrus. Socrates declares: 'For Beauty, Phaedrus, mark well only Beauty is at one and the same time divine and visible, and so it is indeed the sensuous lover's path, little Phaedrus, it is the artist's path to the spirit.' He then asks whether this path has pitfalls: 'Or do you think rather (I lead it to you to decide) that this is a path of dangerous charm, very much an errant and sinful path which must of necessity lead us astray?' (1988, 264). St. Gregory of Nyssa answers this question in *De virginitate* when he claims that it is only through ascetic discipline and by purifying 'the eyes of the soul' that this is at all possible (quoted in Cadenhead, 2018, 50).

The audience watching *Swan Lake* must wrestle with this difficult dilemma and negotiate the dangers of which Socrates warns. As Heller comments about the short story (and this is equally true of *Swan Lake*) aesthetic enjoyment has the tendency to turn to 'infatuation, infatuation to love, love to degrading abandon, and abandon to death' (1958, 109). Indeed, Aschenbach could have saved himself from death by leaving Venice – instead he stays, erotically transfixed by Tadzio and he breathes his last breath there as a consequence. Are the audience uplifted to a transcendent realm by the beauty of the dance or tempted to indulge in a voyeuristic descent into lust by watching two beautifully toned male bodies long for each other? As Robertson aptly puts it, 'Mann explores the unstable relation of art and desire through his devotee of classicism, Gustav von Aschenbach' (2002, 97). What we are arguing for is that the former is suggested throughout the dance and that the experiencing of the longing for beauty is indeed a spiritual path that needs to be trodden in order to rise above the mundane. The creation of art (in this case the medium of dance), is the artist's encouragement onto this path towards the spirit and the experience of the beauty of art is simultaneously an experience of the divine. The encouragement towards homoerotic lust is not the defining feature or intention of Bourne's production. However, we do accept for this to take place, a certain purifying of the eye of the soul is necessary, as ascetics throughout the ages have taught.

However, any final consummation can never be realised in this world, even in moments of transcendence when desire is disparaged, for that is what they are by nature, temporary, disciplined instantiations of uplifting shifts towards the Real. What is also clear is that the transitional state always involves a wrenching apart from the familiar and comforting. This is attested to in Plato's *Phaedrus* (2009), where Socrates argues that the soul is borne aloft toward the divine on the back of Eros. But not everyone flew upward to join the transcendent path. Hestia, the goddess of home and the hearth, whose being is tied to the essence of things, does not participate in this cosmic cycle at all. So from this we can conclude, no soul can erotically transcend by the comforting path of the homely. To erase feelings of alienation, one must feel the

pull of alienation itself from the comforting and secure. Dalton is right to suggest then that ‘... no soul can erotically transcend without becoming alienated from the homely, without diverging from the paths familiar to it. ... paths which carries us elsewhere’ (35). In order to make this transition possible ‘There are a great many different kinds of spirits, then, and one of them is Love’ says Diotima (Sym, 203a), explaining that ‘Divinity and humanity cannot meet directly; the gods only ever communicate ... with men ... by means of spirits’ (203a).

The notion of longing for wholeness and happiness is further expounded in Plato’s myth about pride and arrogance. The *Symposium* narrates how Zeus split in two every member of the human race (190e), due to their ill-assumed ‘strength and power’ and because ‘they were also highly ambitious’ (190e). Consequently, they began to die out. So Zeus took pity on them and with the rest of the gods decided that sexual desire and love would be the means by which their original nature would be drawn back together. This is how longing began, a desire for one’s other half, striving with all one’s heart to be united with that which has been split asunder and thereby to regain integrity (192a). The heart’s desire according to this story, is eagerly awaiting to be united and fused with the one it loves, to be one in union, instead of two: ‘“Love” is just the name we give to the desire for and pursuit of wholeness’ (192c). Longing, therefore, for Plato, is inextricably tied to Love and it is this which should be sustained and encouraged. It is part of our nature. Aristophanes ends his speech by saying, ‘We human beings will never attain happiness unless we find perfect love, unless we each come across the love of our life and thereby recover our original nature. In the context of this ideal, it necessarily follows that in our present circumstances the best thing is to get as close to the ideal as possible, and one can do this by finding the person who is his heart’s delight’ (193c).

#### 4. The Song of Songs

The definitive Jewish and Christian exposition of metaphysical longing is contained in the *Song of Songs*, the most widely read Biblical book in the Middle Ages. It takes up this notion about the intrinsic nature of wo(man) to seek wholeness in union with a ‘delightful’ one. According to Plato and the Christian tradition, longing is a constituent part of the ascent of humanity and its movement towards happiness. Without this, as Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI writes, ‘... man is somehow incomplete’, since he is always ‘driven by nature to seek in another the part that can make him whole’ (*Deus*, 11). Adam is a seeker, a person of longing, one who desires the person who will make him the integrated one he is meant to be. Longing, therefore, is rarely separated from the object of longing – the Other *is* my longing, it is an experience of the one who is desired and is propelled by his/her embodiment (Scruton, 2001, 85). It is fitting, therefore that ‘a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife and they become one flesh’ (Benedict, *Deus*, 11). Such cleaving and union with a sexual other involves flesh touching flesh, an action of haptic intimacy, showing how deep the need for cleaving is; any unwanted disruption of this longing for *wholesome touching* is bound to be painful – human beings are destined, for their own happiness, to cleave to an(other) through one to one erotic embracing (Griffiths, 2018, 60). It was not good that the man was alone, therefore ‘a helper as his partner’ was made (*Gen*, 2,18). The *Song of Songs*, originally written for Jewish wedding feasts, endorses this legitimate longing for human companionship to create wholeness, but essentially it describes God’s relation to humanity and humanity’s relation to God’ (*Deus*, 11). For Plato and the Christian tradition, this involves a kind of ‘divine madness’, which by overpowering the sometime restrictive nature of Reason, enables wo(man) to experience supreme happiness. Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* we might accurately describe as being ‘madly in love’ and only those who experience it know how it feels; indeed, Romeo tells Friar Lawrence categorically, ‘Thou canst not speak of that thou dost not feel’ (Act, 3, 3, 1.64).

Through this intrinsic relationship between love and the divine, the experience promises a reality far greater and totally Other than any quotidian one. It helps us to ascend towards the good and the beautiful, rather than descend towards the base and ugly. Thus, understanding *Swan Lake* through Greek philosophical and biblical eyes, we as an audience, see in the swans’ longing a mirror image of our own aspirations; in other words, *the swans are us in their search for happiness*. That is why we mourn and pity them when they cannot reach their natural goal; however, we do rejoice at seeing their final togetherness, their cleaving after death. The theological and spiritual purpose of the *Song* urges readers to believe that humanity (besides forming intimate human relationships of ‘divine madness’) can also naturally ‘... enter into union with God - his primordial aspiration’, a unity which entails simultaneously, that they both remain themselves and yet are fully one (*Deus*, 10). Identity is enhanced, not negated by union with the divine. It can be argued, therefore, that the longing for human intimacy is prefaced on a more ancient divine longing and relationship with humanity; it witnesses to the never adulterated, loyal, unconditional exemplar of Biblical divine love to be emulated.

The highly eroticised description of the lovers figures the love of God for Israel, His church and for every individual (*Song*, 1, 15-2.7). Commenting on 2, 8-17. St. Gregory of Nyssa writes that the *Song* ‘sets out for us matters that evoke a desire for contemplation of transcendent goods’ (2012, 151). This desire becomes a staged movement of ascent. The hearing of the ‘voice’ of the One who is desired does not give absolute ‘conviction about the nature of the One sought, but a voice that creates, not assurance, but plausible conviction about the identity of the One who speaks’ (151). The alluring sound of the one desired/longed for is heard, but the seeker ‘does not seem to have laid hold of what she seeks’

(151). At first, it is literally out of the seeker's grasp. Echoes of the Beloved always remain incomprehensible and hidden from rational thought and the one who seeks knows (s)he will discover it only in shadow and darkness, not in conceptual clarity: 'I am seeking what is hidden in the darkness – but the object of my love has flown from the net of my thought' (Gregory, 193). The mystery which remains is never conquered entirely, but rather accepted trustingly, and, as in human relationships of love, becomes a sign of maturity. But how is darkness cleansed so we can see the divine and hear His call and feel his presence? (201). The answer is through ways of self-control and diligence, the path of virtuous living and, at the same time, by allowing the divine thirst to become embedded in the hearts of those who seek union: 'The chamber of the heart' is naturally receptive to the divine within' (195). Desire for God is ultimately God's work within his creation, not humanity's own work on themselves. As Gregory points out, referring to psalm 62.2. 'being dry and desolate, and un-watered' she 'took the divine thirst into itself' (201).

What becomes apparent in this stirring of longing, are the brief snatches of beauty which are fleeting, but ample enough to propel one onto the next stage of the ascent. As Gregory writes, 'That is why she says *Behold, he is coming* – not stopping or abiding, so as to be made known to an observer by standing still but snatching himself out of sight before he is perfectly known' (153). There is some despair or wound in this, because we can never have a precise understanding of the One desired, who is both presence and then absence (183). But what is heard is then seen, beheld, looked upon, if only fleetingly. First comes the invisible voice, 'The voice of my beloved' (*Song*, 2, 8), but this voice always presses toward visibility, witnessed in the incarnation, 'Look, there he stands' (*Song*, 2, 9). Theologically, therefore, the oral beckoning becomes visibly manifest as the Beloved becomes seen. The Word heard eventually appears as the Christ, the One made flesh, prefaced by the oral, prophetic utterings of the Old Testament. In *Swan Lake* the music does this by creating a mood of anticipation before the actual, fleeting, physical sightings and comings and goings of the swans.

As the desirous swan draws gradually physically closer to his Beloved during the time span of the dance, his *desire increases*, since he comes to sense the beauty of the one sought. He can never get enough and so moves on to the next stage of even more passionate longing and then again, moves on and on and on. Gregory puts it like this: 'desire increases in proportion to her progress toward that Light which eternally shines out. Good things which are always beyond her'. The exhortation to 'Rise up' becomes the encouragement to ascend to the divine; but '... there will never be any wanting of an up-rising to end', nor 'for one who runs to the Lord will opportunity for the divine race be used up' (171). The movement is endlessly transformative for the lover since 'becoming whatever it determines upon, it undergoes alteration in accord with what it seeks' (113). Glory is always being received (*2 Cor 3,16*). Thus, the ongoing intensity of the lovers' experience of yearning is one of ceaseless, staged movement, a journey of illuminating growth through longing. Gregory writes 'the soul was always being changed for the better by comparison with each current stage of growth and so never stopping at the good she had already grasped' (187). The beautiful one, conceived as Light, mingles with the nature of wo(man), just as the swan, glimpsing and mingling with the one sought becomes transfigured. However, 'the mirror that is human nature does not become beautiful(fair) until it has drawn close to the Beautiful and been formed by the image of divine Beauty' (163). That is why the text states the word 'close' twice; proximity is crucial; separation a disadvantage. Nevertheless, this entails a *gradual approach* to the beautiful and this is encouraged – a too hasty touch is unadvisable and fails to bring about the effect wished for. Only later in the dance-narrative do the two swans dance visibly together and eventually become enfolded in each other's arms and legs. Each step exhibits a more refined and intense espousal of the Beloved and the seeker is changed for the better as he makes the journey, a gradual moving along the path towards consummation.

The refrain 'My beloved' occurs 36 times in the Song and is once followed by the evocative phrase 'is mine and I am his' (2,16-17) suggesting an exclusive, intimate communion to the relationship. As Griffiths comments, such words express 'confidence in an ineradicable intimacy coupled with a deep note of purpose'. The beloved is 'for him', 'as gift and end' and he is 'for me' as 'gift and end' (72). He continues, 'This formula, here spoken by her, is repeated verbatim by him at 4.6. Repetitions of this sort, when spoken by both partners, are a strong indication of symmetrical reciprocity between the two' (73). The swans begin to echo each other in their physicality and movements. The closest scriptural echo is expressed in the covenant relationship in Jeremiah 32: 37 'And they will be a people for me and I will be their God'. In chapter 6.v.1. after praising her lover's body, she is asked by the daughters of Jerusalem where he is; he seems to have disappeared and gone away. Presence and absence are strongly revealed here; when he is absent, she wants him back, as indicated in the lament (1:16). Presence and absence sit side by side, like God's appearance and disappearance. As the Song's lover speaks and is gone, so the Lord speaks and then speaks no more ... we yearn for the Lord's caress' (183), a theme echoed in Romeo and Juliet's exchanges after their first night together: Juliet asks, 'Wilt thou be gone? It is not yet near day/It was the nightingale, and not the lark' to which Romeo answers, 'I must be gone and live, or stay and die' (Act 3, 5. 1-2, 11). Likewise, the loving swans meet and then depart sorrowfully from each other, with the anticipation of the audience wishing them to return on stage and to be with each other.

The first mention of a bed occurs in 1.17. It is called a 'flowerful bed' and recalls desire and fertility. And it is in a house

whose beams are of cedar and whose ceiling is cypress. These decorations are mentioned in Solomon's Temple (*1 Kings*), Thus it is to imply that the lovers' bed is in the Lord's house (Griffiths, 48). This place for love making figures humanity's adoration and embracing of the divine. Human love participates in Israel's and the church's worship of God. The bed also suggests a mingling of the human race with the divine. It becomes the venue for sensual enjoyment and the senses are fully and creatively engaged by the desire for union (51). The senses delight in the Lord, just as human love making does: 'We want to taste our love as well as see and touch and smell and hear them' writes Griffiths (83). In the eucharist especially, Christians 'lick and suck and ingest the Lord and find his taste good' (83). The author of the *Song* was no gnostic hater of the body.

### 5. The Wound of Love

However, the experience of the bride is not without pain. In chapter 2.10 the bride is told, 'Get up, O my beloved...' which implies that she must not remain alone but seek the company of the one she loves. Such exhortation implies sadness and the possibility of failure, since she might not find her lover wandering in the streets of the city. The experience of ascent and transfiguration is one of being wounded by love. Gregory writes that this comes about primarily through the incarnation of 'His only begotten Son' who is 'His chosen arrow (Is. 49.2) to the elect, dipping the triple point at its tip in the Spirit of Life. ... As the soul is raised up by these divine elevations, she sees within herself the sweet dart of love that wounded her, and she glories in the wound: I am wounded with love. Indeed, it is a good wound and a sweet pain by which life penetrates the soul; for by the tearing of the arrow she opens, as it were, a door, an entrance into herself. For no sooner does she receive the dart of love, than the image of the archery is transformed into a scene of nuptial love' (Gregory, 1962, 178-9). As Laird comments, 'Not only does the arrow tip of faith mediate union with and the indwelling presence of the bridegroom, it also causes the bride's desire for the Beloved to expand' (2007, 96). One cannot here but recall the Bernini sculpture of St. Teresa's ecstasy – an image once eroticised and divine to communicate the intensity of the one pierced by love.

There is also a feeling of languidness in the *Song*, the possibility of non-reciprocal, unrequited love. Here human love differs from divine love, since the former is always unsatisfactory, promising what it cannot deliver – an eternal, unbroken bliss. Human relationships are open to betrayal, unlike God's. Adulterous liaisons for God are impossible, but for human lovers, sexual restlessness can find monogamous rest only in the Him, the Lord (Griffiths, 75). However, what the *Song* seems to be suggesting is that human love can be transfigured and share in this unceasing divine love and knowledge. Thus, although the analogy with corporeal desire is maintained through the *Song*, there is evidence of some opposition and difference (Gregory, 2012, 205). As Gregory insists 'divine beauty evokes love because it is fearsome' and 'it reveals itself as coming from elsewhere than corporeal beauty' (203), in a location not contained within the material world, but beyond it. That is why human lovers need to share in its promises.

### 6. Longing for the Divine

Let us now extend the notion of universal, undeniable, metaphysical longing. Dalton argues, convincingly, that longing (and he believes this includes metaphysical) is 'one of the subterranean underpinnings of our identity' (4). Pushing this further, Varden in *The Shattering of Loneliness* (2018), suggests along similar Platonic lines, that we are made for metaphysical longing and, if we are sufficiently open and receptive, will become aware of the loving call of the divine from afar. As he writes, 'The Church fathers reflected much on this longing. They were convinced by both analysis and experience, that awareness of God is stamped on our being as an operating system installed, waiting to be launched' (135). This is an ontological claim about the nature of our being and what constitutes human endeavour and happiness. As Carlisle similarly comments about spiritual desire, 'We do not simply have desires, but we are – at least in some sense, and to some extent – constituted by desire and our habits are formations of that desire: the shape they take as they are lived' (2019, 433). Carlisle's penetrating examination of the distinctiveness of religious desire, suggests that it is characterised by 'infinite desire' which consists in a non-finite, indeterminate and open-ended aspiration or longing for something that cannot be fully specified. Spiritual practice is structured teleologically around this indeterminate goal. And it is reciprocal. It is as much about God's desire for us, as it is about our desire for God. The religious life therefore, revolves around ongoing habits of desire and crucially, us being-desired. She draws on the wisdom of the French Catholic priest, Ravaisson, to substantiate her claims and his work is relevant to our argument. Desire is structured around the longing for the good and ultimately for God, and this entails a neo-Platonic insistence that potentially, all existence participates in God's being and is thus desirable. The implication here is that sexual desire is good in itself since it participates in God's will and goodness. When the motivation is pure and unselfish, as we desire the singular, human other, we simultaneously desire the goodness of the divine since human and divine desire are intimately entwined.

The German poet Rilke in his *The Book of the Monkish Life* (1899), advises the monk wrestling with his longing for the divine in marriage terms, and that it is 'the high office of groom for which you've been named' (2001, 49). Ironically

this 'office' is sometimes most acute amidst lustful desire which only sees 'On pious paintings even the cheeks once pale/turn crimson red with strange appeal;' (49), but which knows within a 'rampant dreadful din' that a metaphysical desire is felt, which is a 'longing I hold in'(51). Even when he sees the beckoning allure of a woman 'in my neighbourhood/who waved at me from wilting wear' (51) he is aware of God who speaks of 'distant lands/so that my concentrated gaze/runs past the rolling hills' (51). By humbling himself before such divine whisperings, he is raised up: 'I have a hymn that I keep to myself. To an upward gaze within I bow my head:'(52). He knows he is made of longing. Varden writes in response: 'Our most intimate desires carry messages from afar. They make us homesick for a land we have not yet discovered' (134). No-one, suggests Rilke, is ultimately satisfied with the mundane and base, even (perhaps especially), as it manifests itself through the temptation of erotic pleasure when divided off from love; no-one likes prostituting themselves, unless they have to; they feel shame when they give into this temptation. For there is a higher calling, a spiritual marriage possible, which becomes the goal for both human and divine longing and love-making.

If this is the case, then we are never alone, since the echo of the transcendent situates itself within our being and within out longing; it destroys any sense of loneliness, summed up in the title of Varden's book *The Shattering of Loneliness*. This inevitably involves a movement of longing for that which is Other, beyond, removed from proximity and yet close at hand to be called upon in response to a first call (Torevell, 2013). This experience is characterised by a kind of awareness, intuition, homesickness or longing for the transcendent. And it involves a theological contextualization whereby one comes to acknowledge a divine voice from the beyond, away from the un-satisfactoriness of the world (Cook), postulating a 'metaphysical relation that can accounted for on a strict theological reasoning' (Varden, 135).

Human longing, therefore, emerges from the ontological status of our innate, divine being, our recognition of the Biblical teaching that we are created in God's image. Our instinctual, base nature does not have the final word on who we are (Perry, 2016, 20). Athanasius agrees for he claims in his *On the Incarnation of the Word* (1944), that nothing in the world can completely satisfy us. Thus, a healthy elasticity takes place through longing which carries humanity forward towards a life lived in relationship with God, assured by God's promise to give us glimpses of eternal life in this world and fully in the next: 'Men are stretched between what they are by nature (footnote on meaning of nature here).and what they are called to become by God's promise'(Varden, 138). Therefore, to be 'created in God's image is to carry in the depth of one's being a longing to transcend the boundaries of human nature so as to have a share in divine life' (138). Flood, in his study of the nature of religion and its philosophy of life, agrees: 'There is a desire for vertical ascent attested throughout the history of religion' (2019, 91). Despite all this, obstacles are put in our way which lean us towards a forgetfulness of our ontology, a theme we now pursue in more detail.

## 7. Obstacles to Transcendent Longing

Let us extend Varden's notion of longing by illuminating his argument in relation to obstacles which prevent metaphysical longing, for it is directly linked to the narrative of the dance. He suggests that because humanity's 'desire for self-determination overcame his yearning for eternity'; he preferred his 'nature' to his 'vocation'. He was thus brought back to nothingness, like Adam and Eve who are reminded that it was dust from which they came 'and to dust you shall return' (Gen.3, 19). Humanity's soaring longing which responded to the call and voice of the divine within its own heart, was crushed by an inclination to emulate the Divine Being without reference to that Being, in other words, to be proudly autonomous (rather than to work with what was given by God) and to make false claims about its assumed elevation through a reductionist, self-determining refusal of God. (Torevell, 2019). It is not surprising that Varden calls this 'an asphyxiating limitation' (139). He refers again to St Athanasius to make his point about the interconnection between forgetfulness and the attenuation of longing (143). Forgetful and gradually becoming unaware of God's image within us, longing began to flicker as Pelagian wo(men) lost their orientation towards the divine and their eyes looked downwards instead of upwards. A desire for autonomy led to the forgetting of God and produced a dulled awareness of his presence. This recalls St. Augustine's warning that once love becomes re-directed from God towards the self, a dangerous *amor sui* (self-love) and narcissistic tendency is likely to occur (Torevell, 2019, 12-13). Lasch names the characteristics of such narcissism in everyday life as follows: 'dependence on the vicarious warmth provided by others combined with a fear of dependence, a sense of inner emptiness, boundless repressed rage, and unsatisfied oral craving' (2018, 45). And this is precisely why, according to Athanasius, the incarnation occurred – to help humanity see in the flesh of Christ the presence of God and to be reminded that their own flesh was made in the image of God too; that they were indeed partakers of the divine nature.

Those swans who attack the legitimate longing and love of the protagonists in the dance, are so concerned with their own self-determining survival that they became jealous of others' longing for the transcendent, even those who had been a part of their own community. The isolation of the lovers is witnessed in the movements of the dance. This becomes characterised by downward, self-contained desire rather than an upward movement of longing. A helpful distinction between desire and longing by tracing the etymological roots of the words assists our argument here. The noun 'longing' is



derived from the adjective 'long', indicating distance. Where 'longing is concerned, 'I' (in old English as in Greek) stands as an indirect object, patient of impulses from elsewhere' and 'indicates receiving something from elsewhere, receptive of God's calling out to its image in me' (Varden, 146). Contrary to this, desire indicates my own, self-willed impulse towards something better which I think I need, but which I do not possess; it is fundamentally selfish.

For some critics, this trajectory of self-willed autonomy can be seen in secular attitudes towards education. What replaced the 'enchantment' of the universe sustained by God's spirit to which we respond with love and gratitude, was an insistence on the preferred goal of individual freedom and personal autonomy. A corresponding feature of this move away from any notion of the divine is invariably witnessed by the pursuit of self-realization and independence, a pursuit 'freed from the moral constraints of an inherited religious tradition' (Pring, 2018, 72). Freedom and subjectivity here become a synonym for God. But concerns have been legitimately raised about this tendency, because 'subjectivity, like the divinity whose place it is stealthily usurping, is an unfathomable abyss - a thought which is as alarming as it is exhilarating. In what sense can an abyss serve as a foundation? (Eagleton, 2015, 52). Secular autonomy and the drive towards self-fulfilment without God, thus negate the transcendent longing of the beyond, with the result that an education system which disparages any notion of the divine, becomes complicit in reductionism and barbarism, assisting humanity to forget their nature as beings of metaphysical longing. The swan is prevented from searching for his Beloved by the self-determined, envious obstinacy of his opponents; this becomes poignant and disturbing for the audience, since an attractive longing characterised by sweet languishing and movements of elegant gesturing, is rudely sabotaged by awkward angularity and disruptive physicality. Longing is prevented and who we are is crushed. For those in the audience who believe in a fallen world, this is not surprising.

## 8. Conclusion

Longing is elegantly danced in Bourne's production of *Swan Lake*. It evokes the insatiable, human longing for beauty and value, reflected in the graceful movement and gestural features of the two main swans, throwing into relief the awkward oppositional movements of their enemies, who ruthlessly turn against them and attempt to destroy their love. The final scene after death, where they become united, not only reveals that, theologically speaking, longing will always fail to be consummated, to some degree, in this world, but that lovers' determinations to find resolutions for their innate longings are well worth the efforts and reflect a natural aspect of who they are as women and men in their pursuit of beauty, happiness and transcendence.

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## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> We wish to make the point that we recognise that no dance performance is static and unchanging. McFee (1992, 89) reminds us that dance on a stage, compared to other visual arts objects such as painting or sculpture, exists in moments of time, witnessed and interpreted by diverse audiences, constantly shifting in their interpretive reception. The art, and therefore the story imparted, is brought into completeness by being performed during a period of time but disappears as quickly as it comes into being. McFee also points to a permanence of dance, as it is possible to go and see the same dance the following night, week, month or year later; this raises the question, 'is it the same dance I saw last night?' We suggest that the *dynamic of longing* shown throughout the ballet is likely to be the thing that the audience appreciate and perhaps for which they return, since the supple shapes, gestures movements and beauty of the bodies represent this defining feature with alluring gracefulness. There is a picture of pure and enduring love centred around the universal feeling of desire performed in *Swan Lake* which is unchanging. Its motif of *longing* is constant, even if novel interpretations and productions come into being. For example, Mathew Bourne's production of *Swan Lake* in 1995 is very different from the Sir Matthew Bourne's production in 2018, despite having the same storyline. Everyone and everything within this production has moved on during its 25 years existence. Careers as male swans have come, been enjoyed and flown, to the extent that Bourne created a *Swan School* to ensure a ready supply of male leads. Bourne's most recent interpretation of *Swan Lake* was revised to reflect current-day trends in challenging gender stereotypes, inequality and racial issues, impacts of war, social disharmony and power relationships, but essentially the same story was told. And that story, we suggest, is a narrative of *longing*.

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