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Laurence Whistler, The Dream of the Rood, *and the Alfred Jewel*

The Alfred Jewel, arguably the most iconic object surviving from the early medieval period in England, has long captured the imagination of scholars, students, and other viewers. Found in a field in Somerset in 1693 and now held by the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, the Alfred Jewel is an exquisite artefact made in enamel, rock crystal, and gold (see Fig. 1a; the images are located at the end of the essay). Its central tear-shaped image is of a small figure holding floriate rods; this enamelled depiction is covered in a piece of rock crystal and enclosed in a gold frame which at its lower end joins to a small gold animal-head socket. The socket probably once held a wood or ivory pointer designed with reading in mind. The frame around the enamelled image consists of gold filigree letters that make up the words «AElfred mec heht gewyrcan» (Alfred ordered me to be made). It is generally held likely therefore that Alfred the Great, king of Wessex from 871 to 899 AD, himself commissioned the object (Webster, 2003; Hinton, 2008). The possibility that its making was connected to the educational programme spearheaded by Alfred is suggested by the reference in the Preface to the Old English *Pastoral Care,* a work closely associated with Alfred, to an *æstel* (perhaps book-pointer), one of which, so the Preface asserts, was to accompany each copy of the work sent out by Alfred to the various bishoprics (Irvine, 2023: 74-75). The Alfred Jewel, with its socket fitting, could well have been made as an *æstel* to accompany a copy of the *Pastoral Care*.

Although the Preface to the Old English *Pastoral Care* is only incidentally of interest to the main subject of this essay, its mention here has a particular significance in the context of a Festschrift for Dora Faraci, since Dora and I have long shared a research interest in Old English prefatory material. Our conversations on this topic, as well as on many others over the years, have always been a source of inspiration

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to me. It is a pleasure to write this essay in honour of someone from whose wisdom and friendship I have benefited so much.

Amongst those in the modern period for whom the Alfred Jewel has held a particular appeal is the twentieth-century glass engraver and poet Laurence Whistler (1912-2000). Whistler includes an image of the Alfred Jewel in his 1975 engraved glass visualisation of an Old English poem that is close to Dora's heart, the dream vision known as *The Dream of the Rood*, probably composed in the late seventh or eighth century (Swanton, 1987). Whistler's Dream of the Rood window is one of thirteen engraved glass windows that he produced between 1955 and 1985 for St Nicholas's Church in the village of Moreton, Dorset, after its original Victorian stained glass windows were blown out by a Second World War bomb. The windows, made by scratching or tapping clear uncoloured glass with a sharp point, cover a range of themes: the seasons, light and darkness, fruitfulness in sunlight, lightning, the light of the galaxy, forgiveness, to name just some[1]. Many of them are commemorative, including the Dream of the Rood window which has an inscription commemorating Commander Noel Charles Mansfeldt Findlay (1899-1976). The Dream of the Rood window is located on the north side of St Nicholas's Church. Engraved on the window is a huge cross suspended in the sky above a pastoral landscape with rolling hills, a body of water, trees, oast houses, a house, and a church (see Fig. 2). One of the arms of the cross is adorned with sparkling jewels and small gems fall from it towards the ground below. The other arm of the cross is set against a dark rain-spattered sky and from this arm fall small droplets that are distinct from the rain itself. At the very centre of the cross, where the arms meet the vertical beam, an image of the Alfred Jewel is engraved (see Fig. 3). Building on an earlier essay I wrote about this window, I will argue here that for Whistler the Alfred Jewel is not only physically the central point of the Dream of the Rood window, but also the key to its personal and spiritual meanings[2].

Laurence Whistler studied English at the University of Oxford in the early 1930s and may well first have encountered the Alfred Jewel at the Ashmolean Museum during this period. While at Oxford, Whistler had in mind a career as a poet: he published two volumes of poetry, *Armed October* and *Four Walls*, earning the 1935 Royal Gold

[1] For photographic images of some of the windows, see Whistler (1985a: Plates 1-22).

[2] This essay draws in some parts on Irvine (2022), but presents new research findings on Laurence Whistler's design and interpretation of the Alfred Jewel in his Dream of the Rood window.

Medal for the latter (Whistler, 1932, and Whistler, 1934). He also developed a scholarly interest in architecture, subsequently publishing the first of two books on Sir John Vanbrugh (Whistler, 1938). It was glass-engraving, however, taken up as he left Oxford, that became his life-time occupation. As well as the series of windows at St Nicholas's Church, his commissions included numerous goblets, bowls, decanters, small panels, and prisms[3].

Laurence Whistler's engravings often reflect his literary bent. One decanter, made in 1949, is engraved with a poem by Walter de la Mare (Whistler, 1975: Plate 6); another decanter, made in 1975, includes a quotation from a poem by Thomas Hardy (Whistler, 1975: Frontispiece). A number of his goblets too are inscribed with snippets of poems by writers including Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Siegfried Sassoon, Edward Thomas, and T. S. Eliot. Nevertheless Whistler's decision to produce a visualisation of an Old English poem seems initially surprising. His knowledge of *The Dream of the Rood* presumably goes back to his study of Anglo-Saxon as a compulsory element of the undergraduate English curriculum at Oxford University. But this part of the course seems to have held very little appeal for him at the time. In his 1985 biography of his brother, the artist Rex Whistler, Laurence Whistler is open about having done «hardly any work on Anglo-Saxon» for his exams (Whistler, 1985b). At some later point in his life, though, he returned to the poetry from this period and developed an appreciation of it: in a British Library Sounds Recording (2000), he singles out *The Dream of the Rood* as «beautifully written» and «exciting». His Dream of the Rood window presumably reflects this new-found affinity with early medieval poetry. Whistler also seems to have engaged closely with the material culture of the period in designing the window, as the detailed evocation of not just the Alfred Jewel but also other Anglo-Saxon gems attests. Other jewels engraved on the window that can be identified from the Ashmolean Museum's collection include the Ixworth Cross pendant (on the upper part of the cross's vertical beam) and various composite disc brooches, perhaps the one from Sarre, Kent (on the lower part of the cross's vertical beam, just below the Alfred Jewel), and the Canterbury brooch (on the cross-beam to the left of the Alfred Jewel)[4]. Whistler may also have depicted Anglo-Saxon jewels held in the British Museum: the Fuller Brooch (on the lower upright of the cross) and the disc brooch

[3] For a range of examples, see Whistler (1975).

[4] I am grateful to Dr Eleanor Standley, University of Oxford, for her help with identifying these jewels.

from Priory Hill, Kent (on the cross-beam to the right of the Alfred Jewel)[5]. Whistler's fascination with both the poem and contemporary artefacts also inspired him in a second engraving later in 1975: a much smaller visualisation of the cross from the poem, this time hovering over the spires of Oxford, produced as a memorial panel to a former Principal of St Hugh's College Oxford (Whistler, 1985a: Plate 26). The St Hugh's panel omits the Alfred Jewel from its design: this particular feature is uniquely reserved for the Dream of the Rood window.

The engraving on the Dream of the Rood window imaginatively visualises the poem that is its inspiration. At the beginning of *The Dream of the Rood*, a dreamer describes seeing a wondrous cross extending into the sky. This cross is constantly changing its appearance – «wendan wædum on bleom» (changing in garments and colours, line 22; Swanton, 1987: 93) – alternating between jewel-studded radiance and liquid-drenched wetness. Whistler brilliantly visualises these vacillations in the cross's appearance by presenting it as having two contrasting sides: its left-hand side (when facing the window from the inside) is bright and gem-bedecked, while the right-hand side is rain-soaked and bleeding or weeping[6]. In this way, the cross's function in the poem as an emblem of the paradoxical nature of the crucifixion – its simultaneous joy and suffering, triumph and defeat – is transferred to the engraving. At line 28 the poem moves from the dreamer's voice to the voice of the cross itself, which proceeds to relate the story of the crucifixion from its own perspective. It tells how it is cut down at the edge of a forest, then carried by «feondas genoge» (many enemies, line 33; Swanton, 1987: 95) to a hill where it is erected as a cross. Here Christ, «geong hæleð» (the young hero, line 39; Swanton, 1987: 95), climbs on to it. The cross laments its own guilt and takes on Christ's sufferings: «Þurhdrifan hi me mid deorcan næglum; on me syndon þa dolg gesiene, / opene inwlidhlemmas» (They pierced me with dark nails; on me the wounds are visible, open malicious wounds, lines 46-47; Swanton, 1987: 97). An image of intertwined darkness and

[5] For all the jewels mentioned here except the Fuller Brooch see Fig. 3; for the Fuller Brooch see Fig. 2, the lower upright of the cross.

[6] The droplets that fall from the cross in the engraving could be either blood or tears. In *Scenes and Signs on Glass*, his book containing plates of the windows in Moreton Church (*inter alia*), Whistler implies that he has in mind drops of blood when he describes the poet's vision of the Cross as «half flashing with jewels and half bleeding in the rain» (Whistler, 1985a: 116), but in the rubric for the plate itself (Whistler, 1985a: Plate 10) he describes the window as «derived from the Old English poem where the Cross is seen both flashing with jewels and weeping».

light marks the moment of Christ's death: «Þȳstro hæfdon / bewrigen mid wolcnum Wealdendes hræw, / scirne sciman; sceadu forð eode / wann under wolcnum» (Darkness had covered with clouds the Ruler's body, the shining radiance; a shadow went forth, dark under the clouds, lines 52-55; Swanton, 1987: 97). The darkness envelopes the light rhetorically: they contrast with one another yet are simultaneous, a further expression of the paradox of the crucifixion on the poet's part. To convey this aspect of the poem, Whistler exploits the inextricability of dark and light that is integral to the art of glass engraving: «the light needs the dark to be intelligible», he wrote in *The Image on the Glass* (Whistler, 1975: 43). In the Dream of the Rood window Whistler visualises dark and light as not only in contrast to one another but also merging with one another as the light of the engraved glass connects visually the rain and droplets with the jewels, and the dark unengraved body of the cross blends into the blackness of the sky behind.

Whistler does not explicitly depict Christ on the cross in his engraving. But he gestures towards the head of Christ on the cross by engraving at its centre an image of the Alfred Jewel[7]. The complex range of meanings associated with this image deserve close analysis. As I have noted elsewhere (Irvine, 2022: 84), Whistler brilliantly exploits the combination of the Alfred Jewel and the cross itself to visualise the poem's blurring of the figures of Christ and the cross: the cross, as we have seen, takes on Christ's sufferings at the crucifixion. If the Alfred Jewel serves to suggest Christ's head, as Whistler confirms, then the cross itself seems to serve visually as Christ's body, with the cross-beam serving as his outstretched arms and the lower part of the vertical beam as the rest of his body. The figures of Christ and the cross merge just as they do in the poem. And just as the cross in the poem is anthropomorphised, speaking about its dismay at having to crucify Christ, so too the oval head-shaped Jewel in the engraved visualisation awards to the inanimate cross a semblance of humanity.

Whistler also incorporates within his engraving the idea that an object might have a speaking voice, a prominent conceit of the original poem. The words inscribed on the frame of the Alfred Jewel («AElfred mec heht gewyrcan», Alfred ordered me to be made) are painstakingly replicated in the engraved image of the Jewel on the window (see Fig. 1b). By choosing to retain these words, Whistler evokes the poem's

[7] As stated by Whistler: «At [the Cross's] centre the Alfred Jewel […] suggests also the head of Christ» (Whistler, 1985a: 116), and «The Alfred Jewel in the centre forms the face of Christ» (Whistler, 1985a: Plate 11, rubric).

conceit of an inanimate object speaking out, conferring on the cross by association an ability to communicate that reflects its role in *The Dream of the Rood* itself.

Whistler's representation of the Alfred Jewel's enamelled image is also highly significant. The Jewel depicts the upper half of a wide-eyed figure holding two floriate rods. Most scholars would now agree in identifying this as the figure of Sight (Wright, 2007). But at the time when Whistler was designing his Dream of the Rood window, the question of the figure's identity remained controversial. Whistler, I would argue, builds the ambiguity of its meanings into his engraving. For his knowledge of the issue, he probably relied on recent publications. In 1974, the year before the window was made, David Hinton published his *Catalogue of the Anglo-Saxon Ornamental Metalwork 700-1100 in the Department of Antiquities, Ashmolean Museum* (Hinton, 1974), whose detailed drawings of the Anglo-Saxon jewels in the Ashmolean Museum must have been invaluable to Whistler in preparing his engraving. In this *Catalogue* Hinton endorses the proposal made earlier by Egil Bakka (Bakka, 1966) that the figure personifies Sight. But Whistler is also likely to have been aware of another recently proposed interpretation. In an article similarly published in 1974, 'The Iconography of the Alfred Jewel', David Howlett proposed that the figure represents Christ as Wisdom (Howlett, 1974). This article was published in *Oxoniensia*, the annual journal of the Oxfordshire Architectural and Historical Society (OAHS). While it is not possible to prove that Whistler had read the article, there is every reason to think he might have done: the journal would have been of keen interest to someone who once had plans of becoming an architect himself and had written two books on the architect and dramatist John Vanbrugh, and Whistler was also in personal communication with scholars who published in the journal, as is attested by an acknowledgement to him in a much earlier article on Blenheim Palace (Arkell, 1948: 49 and 54). The likelihood that Whistler knew of the interpretation of the figure as Christ as Wisdom is in keeping with the way he uses the Alfred Jewel to suggest Christ's head, which by association also links his engraving of the figure on the Jewel to Christ. In alluding to Christ in two different ways, Whistler conveys simultaneously two different perspectives of Christ: the human and the divine. The angle and shape of the Alfred Jewel reflects Christ's humanity, his capacity to suffer – emphasized by the circular jewel placed just above it that evokes the crown of thorns – whereas the balanced restraint of the small figure engraved within the oval shape

reflects his divinity. Whistler implicitly gestures towards Christ's dual nature, brilliantly visualizing the poet's own interest in this duality, seen, for example, in the way that Christ takes on the role of a heroic warrior while his passive suffering is transferred to the cross.

But Whistler's engraving of the Alfred Jewel is more complex still. On close inspection, it reveals itself to be an ambiguous image, an optical illusion capable of being perceived in two different ways. From one perspective it is, as in the original, a figure holding two flowering rods. From the other we can see in the lower part of the image the features of a face, in this context Christ's face, his eyes (or perhaps eyebrow ridges) formed by the hands of the figure, and his nose and nostrils formed by the tubular stems of the flowers. From this other perspective, the association between the Alfred Jewel and Christ's head that the shape and angle of the Jewel evoke is given further depth. And this perspective also, I would suggest, given the prominence of the eyes at the centre of the image, sees Whistler incorporating the interpretation of the Alfred Jewel figure as Sight which he would have been aware of from Hinton's *Catalogue*. Whistler, it seems, has used optical illusion to build two possible interpretations of the Jewel into his engraving: Christ as Wisdom, and Sight.

Whistler's use of this technique of optical illusion, whereby the same features form two distinct characters, recalls the series of *Reversible Faces* which his elder brother Rex Whistler drew for Shell (1931-1932), as exemplified in Fig. 4, and which Laurence Whistler himself later published separately with accompanying rhymes of his own, first in *!OHO!* in 1946 (Whistler & Whistler, 1946), and then later in *AHA* (Whistler & Whistler, 1978). Indeed the date of the latter, just three years after the Dream of the Rood window was made, may suggest that he had in mind such reversible images at around the time of its design. Laurence Whistler's engraving of the Alfred Jewel, though less fully carried through as an optical illusion than Rex's 'reversible faces', relies on a similar dual perspective to convey its meanings.

It seems likely, as I have previously suggested (Irvine, 2022: 86), that Laurence Whistler alluded to his brother in other ways too in his depiction of the Alfred Jewel. Rex, killed in action in 1944, had played an influential role in Laurence's artistic development and after his death Laurence devoted a lot of his time to publishing books promoting his brother's work and reputation. In his biography of Rex, *The Laughter and the Urn*, Laurence puns on the meaning of Rex's name, describing him as «a child of promise only partly fulfilled, christened Rex to be

kingly, and at least regal in generosity» (Whistler, 1985b: 299). The word *cyning* (king) is used of Christ several times in the poem *The Dream of the Rood* (lines 44, 56, and 133), and Whistler's depiction of an object commissioned by King Alfred to suggest Christ's head alludes implicitly to this 'kingly' aspect of Christ in the poem. But Whistler may also have had another *rex* (king) in mind. In depicting a jewel which was commissioned by one king (Alfred the Great, titled Alfred Rex on contemporary coinage), and served to suggest the head of another (Christ), Laurence may have been implicitly alluding to his brother Rex, the 'kingly' one. For Laurence, the death of Rex in World War II must have epitomized the idea of sacrifice in a transient world, an experience whose meaning could perhaps be reached towards through the paradoxical nature of the crucifixion itself. The Alfred Jewel serves as a focal point where Whistler's very human feelings of grief for his brother can be juxtaposed with the mystery and unknowability of the divine.

For Whistler though, as we have seen, the figure on the Alfred Jewel could perhaps be interpreted not only as Christ but also as Sight. In building the latter interpretation into his engraving, Whistler implicitly echoes the importance of this idea in the original poem. The poem is a dream vision: it describes a vision that comes to a narrator in the middle of the night and how he is affected by that sight. Sight is not the only one of the physical senses the poem incorporates: hearing, touch, and taste also help to develop its meanings (Irvine, 1997: 443). But it is sight that is most prominent in the first half of the poem, perhaps reflecting its status as the highest of all five senses in biblical and patristic texts (O'Brien O'Keeffe, 2017: 105-106). The poem abounds with words for seeing and perceiving: *gesawe* (line 4), *beheoldon* (lines 9, 11, and 64), *geseah* (lines 14, 21, 33, 36, 51), *ongytan* (line 18), *gesyhðe* (lines 21, 41, 66, 96), *beheold* (lines 25 and 58), and *gesiene* (line 46). With this insistence on the sense of sight, the poet creates an interplay between physical vision and spiritual enlightenment, an idea that Whistler's engraving reflects. Whistler may also have seen the association between the Alfred Jewel and Sight as a way of alluding self-consciously to the very visual nature of his own craft of glass engraving. If so, then perhaps too he builds in his own awareness of the uneasy disjunction between the visible and the invisible that is most tantalizing in our own attempts to appreciate his work. Viewed in situ, Whistler's windows at St Nicholas's Church inspire awe in their interplay of light and landscape with the engraved glass. But many of the details that make them most meaningful are invisible to the naked eye, evident only through scrutiny

of close-up photographs. For Whistler, the limitations of the human perspective, its attempts to apprehend what it cannot fully understand, are an intrinsic part of human experience, and the dichotomy of visible and invisible in his work is in keeping with this. But it is also the case that for Whistler, whose work was governed by principles of «integrity and thoroughness», artistic compromise was clearly unconscionable. He expresses the implications of this position eloquently in his praise of the architect Sir Edwin Lutyens: «If little subtleties and harmonies were good, they were good although nobody perceived them. That was his [Lutyens's] answer when people observed that the rightness of a detail was too high up to be seen. "God sees it"» (Whistler, 1975: 18).

The Alfred Jewel makes up only a small part physically of Laurence Whistler's Dream of the Rood window. But its extraordinarily detailed evocation and complex layers of meaning make it a highly significant element in the exploration of the ambiguity and depth of human experience that the poem and engraving share. In bringing together text and image, animate and inanimate, past and present, secular and sacred, visible and invisible, Whistler's engraving of the Alfred Jewel acts as a microcosm of the resonances that inform the window as a whole. Serving as the focal point visually for the Dream of the Rood window, the Alfred Jewel is also the key to its personal and spiritual meanings for Whistler.

Fig. 1a: The Alfred Jewel (871-999 AD), Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.
(Image © Ashmolean Museum)

Fig. 1b: Detail from Laurence Whistler, The Dream of the Rood window (1975),
St Nicholas Church, Moreton.
(© Estate of Laurence Whistler. Reproduced with kind permission of the family)

Fig. 2: Laurence Whistler, The Dream of the Rood window (1975),
St Nicholas Church, Moreton.
(© Estate of Laurence Whistler. Reproduced with kind permission of the family)

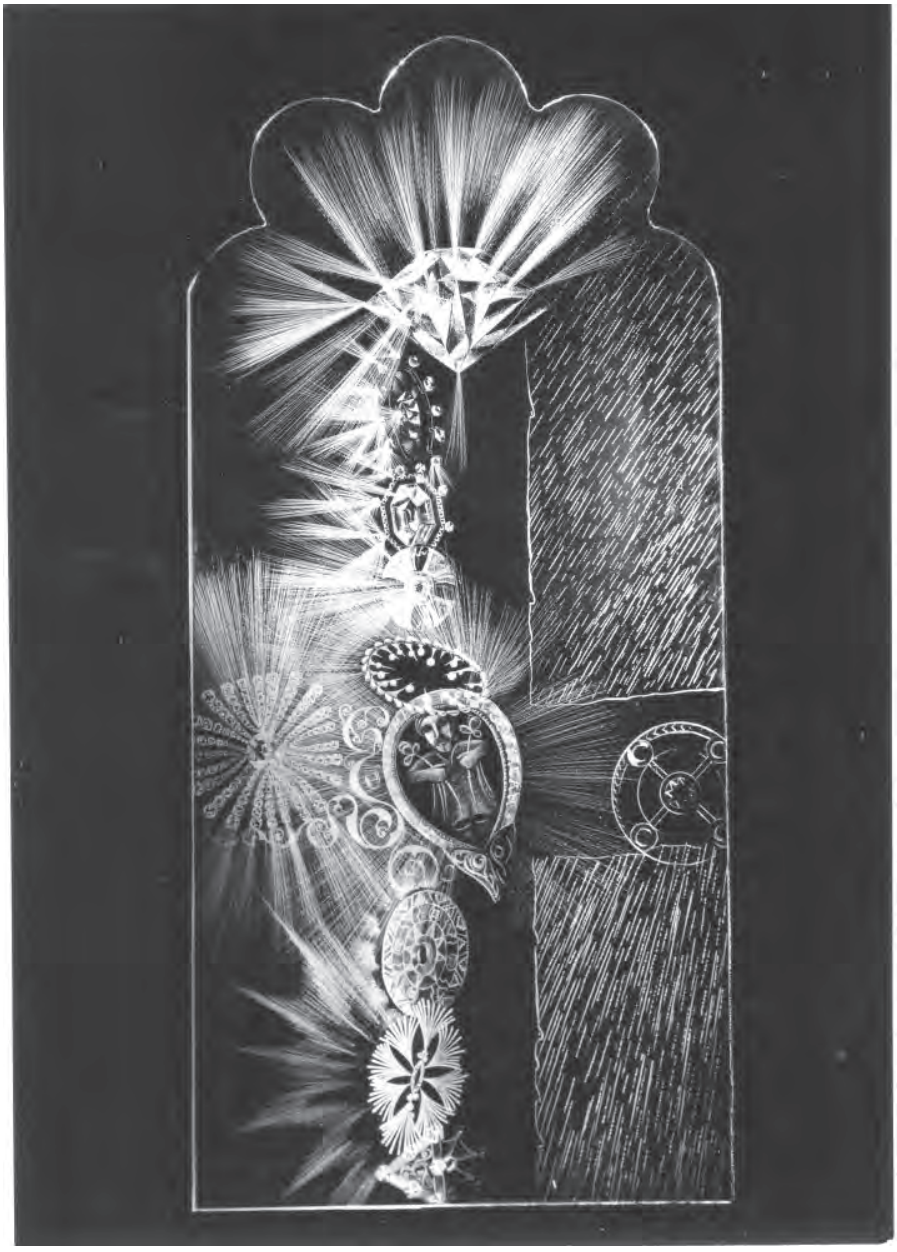

Fig. 3: Detail from Laurence Whistler, The Dream of the Rood window (1975), St Nicholas Church, Moreton.

Fig. 4: 'Reversible face: The scholar and the bruiser' (1931-1932), Rex Whistler Archive, Salisbury Museum. (Reproduced with kind permission of Salisbury Museum ©)

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