

IMPrensa DA UNIVERSIDADE DE COIMBRA
COIMBRA UNIVERSITY PRESS



HOMENAGEM A
IRENE RAMALHO SANTOS

THE EDGE OF ONE OF MANY CIRCLES

ISABEL CALDEIRA
GRAÇA CAPINHA
JACINTA MATOS
ORGANIZAÇÃO

**THE IMAGINATION'S LATINIST: A TRIBUTE TO
'THE WALLACE STEVENS LADY'**

Stephen Wilson

Back in the day, shortly before I left London to come to Coimbra, I bumped into Stephen Fender, then a lecturer in the English Department at University College London who I used to meet occasionally at Ezra Pound related events. Stephen was also on the eve of a move, he was about to take up the post of Professor of American Studies at Sussex, and we spoke briefly of what the future might hold. I confessed that, although I had a friend who worked there, I knew very little about the University of Coimbra. I had, however, corresponded (yes “corresponded” – it really was a long time ago) with my head of department to-be – Maria Irene Ramalho de Sousa Santos – and she seemed to be most helpful and charming. After a moment, Stephen replied: “Ah, yes, the Wallace Stevens lady.”

When I speak of Stevens it is not without trepidation but I must do as the occasion demands, and on this occasion I bring to mind the lines (they are well known) from the second section of “Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction”:

He tries by a peculiar speech to speak

The peculiar potency of the general,
To compound the imagination's Latin with
The lingua franca et jocundissima.

It is the last line (“The lingua franca et jocundissima”) that most obviously invokes Maria Irene, that conjures up something of her intellectual audacity and sparkle. However, I would like to focus on the phrase “the imagination's Latin.” I think that by Latin Stevens means something like that second language that Dante speaks of in his *De Vulgari Eloquentia* (“Est et inde alia locutio secundaria nobis, quam Romani gramaticam vocaverunt”). The “gramatica” is the principles of organization and combination (the rules of grammar if you like), and it is the task of the imagination's Latinist to identify the subject, object and main verb, to bring a seemly order to the subordinate elements and to impose agreement in number and kind. In short, to order and dispose the parts into a decorous whole.

It is not too great a stretch to speak of an academic department (for example, Anglo-American Studies at Coimbra) as an instance, or type, of the Supreme Fiction. Maria Irene created Anglo-American Studies at Coimbra. She was able to do this, in large measure, because she is a brilliant scholar and an inspirational teacher, but also because she was able to organise and to bring together the disparate elements that comprised the department. Stevens wrote that the Supreme Fiction “must be abstract” and while that may be so let us not forget the concrete fact that for years Irene ran the department almost single-handedly: sitting through the meetings, writing the proposals, assigning teaching, managing the comings and goings of staff, signing whatever needed to be signed and even finding time to answer the letters of the new recruits. She did all of this and did it without ever losing her command of the syntax, without ever losing track of the main verb, without – one might say – ever losing sight of the wood among the trees. Those of us who were fortunate

enough to be part of it know that Maria Irene made it possible for us to learn much, to teach much and to be pleased and pleasing while doing so. Stevens also tells us that the Supreme Fiction “must change.” This one has and not, in my view, for the better. That is what happens to fictions, even Supreme Fictions, in their encounter with what W.B. Yeats termed this “pragmatical, preposterous pig of a world” and it does not diminish the achievement. It is that achievement, that Supreme Fiction, and the imagination’s Latinist who made it happen that is saluted here.

Stephen Fender’s words have stayed with me and this is my tribute to the “Wallace Stevens lady.” She is, of course, many other things besides but others better placed to do so have provided testimonies as to that. Although I have never been able to work out exactly what the damn line means, I will end by saying ‘let be be finale of seem’ and assert that I was right all those years ago: she is most helpful and charming.