

The New Criterion

Reconsiderations

March 2008

Mallarmé's wanderings

by [John Simon](#)

On Barbara Johnson's translation of *Divagations* by Stéphane Mallarmé.

Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–1898) was a very great, difficult poet, perhaps the most obsessively pure of all. For him, everything in the world existed to end as a book (a statement attributed to, then adopted by, him), and that book, one way or another, would be a book of poetry. But Mallarmé the prose writer is a different story. In that capacity, he was more problematic, writing a gnarled, convoluted, studiously obscure prose, not infrequently to the point of impenetrability. This is why his main collection of prose, *Divagations* (1897), remained not fully translated into English for 110 years. Now we have the first complete translation by Barbara Johnson, an unholy mess.^[1]

A very large portion of Mallarmé's prose is unlike any other. Difficult as his verse is, it is, with considerable loss to be sure, translatable. But the serious, artisti ...

John Simon's collections of film, theater, and music criticism are available from Applause.

[more from this author](#)

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 26 March 2008, on page 30

Copyright © 2008 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com

<http://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/mallarms-wanderings-3783>