

# 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.<sup>[1]</sup>

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 ...

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

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