

TERZA RIMA IN EUROPEAN LITERATURE: HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT AND POETIC STRUCTURE

Kojanbergenova K

PhD student of Karakalpak State University

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15688936>

Abstract: This article explores the origin and transnational adaptation of the poetic form *terza rima*, first introduced by Dante Alighieri in *The Divine Comedy*. Defined by its interlocking rhyme scheme (*aba bcb cdc*, etc.), *terza rima* flourished in Italian literature but proved challenging to adopt in languages with fewer rhyming possibilities. By tracing its historical and linguistic trajectory, the article contributes to the field of comparative poetics and the study of fixed verse forms.

Keywords: *terza rima*, Dante Alighieri, *Divine Comedy*, fixed poetic forms, rhyme scheme, comparative literature, European poetry, poetic structure, Chaucer, Wyatt, Pushkin.

In literary studies, no fewer than twenty types of works are identified as fixed forms due to their strictly regulated structure. One such form is the *terza rima*.

A *terza rima* is a poem composed of three-line stanzas. There can be many stanzas in such a work. The rhyme scheme is particularly interesting: the rhymes flow from one stanza to the next, forming chains such as *aba bcb cdc ded*, and so on. The final line must have an ending that does not rhyme with any of the previous lines.

The term “*terza rima*” is derived from the Latin expression, which is translated as “*third rhyme*.” It is believed that the *terza rima* originated thanks to the Italian poet Dante Alighieri. For his immortal work *The Divine Comedy*, Dante turned to a structure known as the *ritornello*. Previously, this three-line stanza was used as an introduction or conclusion in Italian folk songs. The chain of *ritornellos* connected by wave-like rhymes became the basis for the *terza rima* form. As an example, let us present excerpts from the original variant of *The Divine Comedy* by the great Italian poet:

La concreata e perpetua sete
del deiforme regno cen portava
veloci quasi come 'l ciel vedete.

Beatrice in suso, e io in lei guardava;
e forse in tanto in quanto un quadrel posa
e vola e da la noce si dischiava,

giunto mi vidi ove mirabil cosa
mi torse il viso a sé; e però quella

TIL HÁM AWDARMA MÁSELELERI

VI ilimiy maqalalar toplami

cui non potea mia cura essere ascosa,

volta ver' me, sì lieta come bella,

“Drizza la mente in Dio grata”, mi disse,

“che n'ha congiunti con la prima stella”.

Paradiso, Canto II

The Divine Comedy gained immense popularity not only among Dante's contemporaries but also among poets of subsequent generations, both in Italy and beyond. The terza rima was adopted by fellow Italians such as Giovanni Boccaccio (in the poems *The Hunt of Diana*, *Ameto*), Francis Petrarck (*The Triumphs*), and others.

Terza rima presents significant challenges for poets, and its adoption was relatively limited in the century following its inception. This difficulty is particularly pronounced in languages that possess fewer rhyming possibilities than Italian. [3] In France, terza rima became widely used during the Renaissance period. The poets of the Pléiade also made use of them. In modern times, following in the footsteps of Théophile Gautier and Leconte de Lisle, a number of French poets have cultivated this form within lyrical genres.

The terza rima form was among the first adopted in English literature by Geoffrey Chaucer, who drew inspiration from the Italian poet Dante and applied it in his poem “*A Complaint to His Lady*.” Nevertheless, Sir Thomas Wyatt is often regarded as the pioneer of this poetic form in England, with his poem “*Second Satire*” frequently cited as an example of its early use:

My mother's maids, when they did sew and spin,
They sang sometimes a song of the field mouse,
That for because her livelihood was but thin

Would needs go seek her townish sister's house.

She thought herself endured to much pain:

The stormy blasts her cave so sore did souse . . . [1]

Numerous English poets, including G. Chaucer, T. Wyatt, Lord Byron, P. B. Shelley, W. H. Auden, Browning, and others, also used the terza rima form. However, due to the complexity of maintaining its structure, the form remained largely confined to Italy until the Romantic period, when poets in other countries began to compose works using it. [2]

The same holds true for the Russian language. Moreover, in many cultures, the use of the terza rima has been closely associated with *The Divine Comedy*, its religious pathos, and its epic scale. However, in Russian poetry, the lyrical component of poetic language has often outweighed the epic one, so the epic nature of the terza rima was not fully embraced. As a result, among the vast variety of works written by Russian authors, there are no more than a hundred instances of terza rimas. Poets who experimented with this verse form include A. S. Pushkin (“*В начале жизни школу помню я...*”, “*И дале мы пошли – и страх обнял меня...*”), A. A. Blok (“*Песнь ада*”), M. A. Kuzmin (“*Свежим утром рано-рано...*”, “*Осенние озёра*”), A. K. Tolstoy (“*Дракон*”), V. Ya. Bryusov (“*По меже*”), Vyacheslav Ivanov (“*Терцины к Сомову*”), and others. [4]

The terza rima remains a distinctive and complex poetic structure within the tradition of fixed forms, marked by its interwoven rhyme scheme and tripartite stanzaic organization. Its invention by Dante Alighieri not only served the narrative and theological ambitions of *The Divine Comedy* but also established a formal precedent that has continued to attract the attention of poets across linguistic and temporal boundaries. Despite its influence, the adoption of terza rima in non-Italian literatures has been uneven, largely due to phonological and lexical constraints that hinder the execution of the form’s demanding rhyme structure. While English and French poets of the Renaissance and Romantic periods experimented with the form, its integration into Russian poetic tradition remained limited, in part due to the predominance of lyrical over epic modes. Nevertheless, the selective and conscious engagement with terza rima by poets such as Chaucer, Shelley, Byron, and Pushkin attests to the form’s enduring artistic value. As a site of both homage and innovation, this form occupies a unique place in the history of European verse, reflecting broader intersections between poetic form, linguistic capability, and cultural transmission.

References:

1. Cuddon J. A. A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory. New York. Wiley-Blackwell, 2013. p 906
2. Padgett, Ron, Ed. Handbook of Poetic Forms. Teachers and Writers Collaborative, New York, 1987. p 203
3. Preminger, Alex, ed. Warnke, Frank J. ed. The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics. Princeton University Press, 1993
4. Литературный энциклопедический словарь, Москва, 1987, 439-с