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Greek Love Triangles and the Search for Common Ground

This paper looks at scientific and literary writings on Greek topography, i.e. the description of the Greek land and its archaeological sites and markers, in the mid-nineteenth century. The texts will come both from European, in particular German, and Greek writers, at a time when the Greek land became both more accessible to scholarly survey and at the same time a representative national territory. The guiding question will be that of a 'common ground', in this case taken quite literally, postulated between either the ancient and modern Greek land, or between either of them in relation to its modern observer: in short, I suggest a model of triangulation, and the resulting tensions, as a powerful figure to consider the conjoined study of ancient and modern Greece.

The aim is to illustrate how the topography of Greece is by no means a stable ground of comparison and how the selection of its material remains is not self-evident; in the self-perception of Greek scholars and writers, in relation to contemporary European perception as its 'third', ancient Greek sites were perceived as a necessary link, included in the cultural, literary and real maps of Greece that were drawn up. In addition, in Greek literary texts detailed descriptions of archaeological remains are often an integral part of a narrative that repeats the tensions between Greece, Europe and the love of the past on a personal level: that of the love triangle.

The focus adopted here is on observations of a second order: of how we write about Greece and, subsequently, of how this shapes our knowledge of Greece. To see ancient and modern Greece and the respective fields of Classical and Modern Greek Studies as part of a triangular structure linked to the scholar and observer of those fields derives from the theoretical interest which cultural studies, sociology and literature have taken in forms of 'thirdness' and triadic structures. The literary figure of the love triangle is only one of the most accessible examples, yet it is representative, as a figure of thought, for the relations which establish structures of desire, rivalry, exclusion and mediation, in the process of defining identity; in the case of describing Greece, this rotating network of allegiance and competition materializes, for example, as the desire for real presence and the contended claims to continuity.