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The Lighthouse as Survival

Philip Steinberg

Europe's recent refugee crisis has often been presented as a battle against the sea. Nations were galvanised by the sobering image of drowned Syrian toddler Aylan Kurdi on a beach in Turkey (Hopkins and Waugh, 2015) and the inspiring image of off-duty soldier Antonis Deligiorgis pulling a terrified Eritrean woman, Wegasi Nebiat, from the surf in Rhodes (Tufft, 2015). Dutch advocates of a humane refugee policy have marched through The Hague dressed as coastal rescue workers and carrying a life buoy (Agence France Presse, 2015). EU policy makers have tried to pick up the pieces from their failed *Mare Nostrum* (Our Seas) border protection programme. And British artist Banksy has drawn attention to the refugee crisis with a provocative reinterpretation of the EU flag as a series of floating corpses at sea (Earthly Mission, nd).

[FIGURE?? PS 2]

In short, across the political spectrum, and in a variety of media, narrations of the refugee crisis and calls for intervention have represented the sea as a space of danger. The right focuses on the dangers that the sea spits up on Europe's shores: migrants, Muslims, terrorists. The left focuses on the sea *itself* as a danger that challenges Europeans to find their inner humanity. According to the right, Europe needs sentinel posts along its coast. According to the left, Europe needs beacons of hope to direct the sea's victims to safe havens. Either way, the lighthouse is enlisted as an illustrative trope, joining the ideals of military guardianship with those of humanitarian assistance that constitute parallel coastal responses to the refugee crisis.

In fact, though, neither the refugee experience nor the lighthouse is rooted in a simple geography where land is the space of life and water is the space of death. Asserting a

verticality that rises above both land and sea, the lighthouse offers a geography that transcends facile divisions of space.

One should recall that the purpose of many lighthouses is not to facilitate safe passage to a harbour, but to draw attention to a dangerous coast. Sailors who think they are safely at sea but suddenly spot the beam of a lighthouse on a foggy night are likely to respond with fear, not joy. Indeed, if lighthouses could speak, many would be casting out words that sound not like left-wing peaceniks in Stockholm, but right-wing hooligans in Budapest: not 'Follow my light to peace and comfort' but 'If you come any closer you will be drowned'.

Additionally, while refugees are indeed seeking refuge from the sea, water is not the central danger in a refugee's life. It is land. As British-Somali poet Warsan Shire (2013) has written:

you have to understand,
that no one puts their children in a boat
unless the water is safer than the land

...

and no one would leave home
unless home chased you to the shore
unless home told you
to quicken your legs
leave your clothes behind
crawl through the desert
wade through the oceans
drown
save
be hunger
beg

forget pride
your survival is more important

Shire directs her missive at those who would advocate sending refugees back to a 'home' that no longer exists. But her words should also give pause to those whose impulse is to assume that refugees must be saved 'from the sea'. Their problems emanate not from the sea but from the land, and it is on land where changes must be made to protect refugee livelihoods.

Furthermore, the land that awaits the refugee is rarely one of seamless assimilation. As Shire continues:

no one chooses refugee camps
or strip searches where your
body is left aching
or prison,
because prison is safer
than a city of fire
and one prison guard
in the night
is better than a truckload
of men who look like your father
no one could take it
no one could stomach it
no one skin would be tough enough

For several years now, scholars from a range of academic disciplines including history (Bentley et al, 2007), anthropology (Hastrup and Hastrup, 2015), literary studies (Klein and Mackenthun, 2004) and geography (Anderson and Peters, 2014),

have challenged an assumed binary between land and sea, where land is understood as the space of stasis, home, safety and society, and the sea as its antithesis. Questioning this binary does more than invert the way we think about the sea: it can challenge how we understand our 'place' as landed beings in a world of flows, connections, mobilities and immobilities. While my previous work in this area has highlighted the potential of the maritime region (Steinberg, 2011, 2013), the floating city (Steinberg et al, 2012), the bridged island (Steinberg and Chapman, 2009), and the ocean itself (Peters and Steinberg, 2014; Steinberg and Peters, 2015) the lighthouse is also a provocative object that disrupts terracentric perspectives. It is both of the sea and of the land. It signals both safety and danger, and human successes in managing that danger as well as the ultimate futility of such efforts. It evokes (and, at times marks) the routes plied by warships, slave ships, cargo ships, and modern-day smugglers of refugees and migrants that have brought fear and hope to residents of distant shores.

The lighthouse is not the only object with an evocative power to challenge simple binaries of land and sea, enabling critical thinking about both the effects and affects of ocean (and trans-ocean) encounters. The sand bar, the island, the archipelago, the ship, the shipwreck, the shipping route, the seabed, sea ice, and countless other features all can be put to similar purpose. But perhaps because of its iconic place in Western culture – from the drama of the oil painting to the banality of the tea towel – the lighthouse is a particularly powerful trope for danger and salvation, longing and loss.

[FIGURE?? PS 4]

In response to the photo of Antonis Deligiorgis rescuing Wegasi Nebiat, it is easy to think of the lighthouse as the embrace at the conclusion of an arduous journey, an end point, a destination. But, as Shire's poem and the experiences of countless refugees, including Nebiat, suggest, the interruption offered by the lighthouse is more ambiguous: a liminal point in a journey where the future may be only a marginal improvement on the past; a node of brief respite in a series of journeys that, in the

case of the refugee, will now proceed on land or which, in the case of the sailor, will involve being cast back out to sea.

If, for Yi-Fu Tuan (1977: 138), a 'place' is a 'pause in movement', the lighthouse is a different kind of place altogether. Like its rotating light, alternately repetitive and absent, resting on a pillar that is invisible when the lighthouse is needed most, the lighthouse's ephemeral materiality is matched by its ambiguous function. The lighthouse generates the hope of a smooth space of mobility, but simultaneously reminds us that such smoothness can never be achieved. A coastline dotted with lighthouses is not a series of destinations, but a limin in a universe of perpetual navigation. No sailor pauses at a lighthouse.

The lighthouse, then, signals neither an end nor a beginning. Nor does it truly offer hope that the dangers of the sea can be beaten back by the security of land, since it reminds us that land, sea, and the spaces where they meet are all spaces of mortal danger. But in offering at least a dream of transcending these dangers, the lighthouse does offer hope. And in this sense, the lighthouse echoes the actions of Warsan Shire's refugee, Aylan Kurdi's parents, or Wegasi Nebiat, who all made difficult choices out of a combination of desperation and calculation. Like the refugee's journey, the lighthouse signals neither just the dangers of the present nor the hope of a better future. As a beacon that rises above the tumultuous tableau, the lighthouse suggests both, and neither. But by bringing these potentials into stark relief, and by revealing how they may be encountered on the maritime journey, the lighthouse signals how the maritime migrant navigates environments of both safety and danger, impelled by an overriding will to survive.