

26th June 2023

Showtime

"Spectatum veniunt, veniunt spectentur ut ipsae."

"They come to see, they come that they themselves may be seen."

Ovid, Ars Amatoria

I spoke yesterday to a young man who was the skipper on the boat which took my wife and myself on a trip to the island of Staffa the last time we were on Iona. The name "Staffa" derives from the Old Norse for stave or pillar, the Vikings giving it this name because its spectacular basalt columns reminded them of their houses, many of which were built from vertically placed tree-logs. The island's main sea-cavern was named "Fingal's Cave" by the 18th century naturalist, Sir Joseph Banks, a *homage* to Ireland's "Giant's Causeway" to which Staffa is both geologically and mythologically linked. But for me the trip to Staffa was to see the puffins.

The skipper informed us we would have an hour ashore, showed us the best place to see the puffins (conveniently marked by a conspicuous red buoy) and suggested that if there were no puffins when we got there, just to wait, and they would come to us. And he was right. Within minutes we were to witness a wonderful show as puffins, singly and in groups, came and went, preened and hopped, twisted and turned, and all within a few feet of a massive pack of *paparazzi*. It was wonderful, all I could have wished for. I'll spend time in Fingal's cave if I go on a trip to Staffa this week or next. But for now, and in conversation with a boatman, I'll remember the cute, clever and crazy birds who put on an amazing display.

I asked the skipper if the puffins perform like that all the time. He smiled wryly. "No, I don't think so. I reckon when the tourists have gone, they all go back to bed. They just put on a show when the visitors are there." Was he right, I wondered? Did the puffins know his boat had arrived? Did they only put on their display when they had an audience? Did the word go round the puffin colony, "Hey, folks. Let's get out there. It's showtime again!"? Did they come "that they themselves may be seen" as Ovid put it? I'll ever know. They had a chance to put on a show, and we could enjoy their beauty and delight in their performance. Nature and humanity at one, in an hour of pleasure and wonder. That'll be enough for me – and for Staffa's puffins too, it seems.

A prayer for today

Lord, let my devotion not be for show, but to matter even when it's not on display. Amen

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