Introduction

This book is about the theme of pilgrimage in a number of writers, English, Irish and American, from Shakespeare and Ralegh to Seamus Heaney and David Lodge. There is some discussion of *Piers Plowman* and the *Ancrene Wisse* in the first chapter, and of St Brendan and the Irish *peregrini* in later chapters; otherwise the emphasis is on post-Reformation literature.

I make no pretence of offering a history of 'pilgrimage literature' as a whole, even in English only, though the studies which follow are intended to clarify that history, and establish an understanding of what we may mean by a literary tradition of pilgrimage. I am, naturally, mainly concerned with the use of pilgrimage as a metaphor for a religious life or dedication, but metaphoric and non-metaphoric usages of 'pilgrimage' are hard to separate. Definition, or an attempt at it, is a prime necessity, and in my first chapter I try to disentangle the roots and stems of meaning in the words 'pilgrim' and 'pilgrimage', umpire the debate between reality and metaphor, consider the arguments about 'true' and 'false' pilgrimage, and mark the difference between those pilgrims who travel hopefully towards a shrine and those others, the *peregrini*, who (as it were) travel from the shrine, either to worship God in the solitude of cave or desert or sea, or else to go abroad to found monasteries and spread the truth. I hope that the definitions I reach are at the same time generous and strict; the course that the book takes is dependent on this initial investigation of meaning.

The major uncertainty in devotional poets of the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries about the value of the imagery deriving from the fundamental metaphor of Christian life as a pilgrimage, as seen in the Epistle to the Hebrews, is the subject of two of my chapters,

beginning with Southwell and culminating in the ironic and sometimes caustic treatment which traditional Christian metaphors receive in Emily Dickinson's poems. My examination of the pilgrimage theme in Shakespeare stresses not only how important the concept of pilgrimage was to him (whatever his own religious persuasion) but also how misunderstanding of the meaning of the word pilgrimage and misreading of Shakespeare's text have concealed the importance of the issue of pilgrimage in the later tragedies. A recurring issue in the book is what might be implied by the snatch of the old Walsingham ballad sung by the mad Ophelia in the fourth act of *Hamlet*.

> How should I your true love know
> From another one?
> By his cockle hat and staff
> And his sandal shoon.

The scallop or cockle shell was worn as a badge by pilgrims who had been to the shrine of St James at Compostela in Spain; it later became part of the traditional pilgrim's dress, along with the broad-brimmed hat, the staff, the scrip or satchel, the water bottle – all given lapidary status in the opening of *The Passionate Man's Pilgrimage* ('Give me my scallop shell of quiet'; see Chapter Four). I argue that Ophelia's fleeting reference to her estranged lover as a pilgrim is not only important for an understanding of *Hamlet*, but is also a kind of turning point in the post-medieval era in the literary use of the pilgrimage motif, marking the moment when the shadow of tragic doubt is cast over the pilgrim's mission.

Deprived by Latimer and Thomas Cromwell of pilgrimage on land, England took pilgrimage to sea. I am unable to accept Samuel Purchas's grounds for redefining pilgrimage as voyaging, and, in particular, colonising America. This endeavour involved the long-lived exploitation of the early Irish *peregrinus*, St Brendan, as an explorer and discoverer of North America. It also led, very directly, to a confusion between metaphor and reality in applying the term 'pilgrims' to the Mayflower settlers. I suggest that two writers from a much later period, Conrad and T. S. Eliot, 'challenge' the Purchas view: Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* with his 'pilgrims' on the bank of the river waiting

for the boat to take them to their loot, and Eliot in his finest pilgrimage poem, *Marina*, restoring New England to its purely metaphorical role of Promised Land. Eliot's religious poetry, in its well-known fusion of movement and stillness in *Four Quartets*, also provides a reconciliation of opposed imperatives in the contention about the appropriateness of the pilgrimage metaphor to a life of Christian commitment.

A main distinction between pilgrimage literature in England and Ireland is that in Ireland pilgrimage was never wholly suppressed, so that the Irish writer's contact with it has been real. The pilgrimage to Lough Derg, where Jesus is supposed to have shown St Patrick the entrance to Purgatory, has been a very rich source of literary accounts since Carleton's time, accounts in which self-examination about the virtue and value of pilgrimage is to the fore. Yeats's poem 'The Pilgrim', set to the music of an old ballad, is important in this respect, and it has been unduly neglected. But my main discussion concerning the Lough Derg writings has to be of Heaney's *Station Island*. This 1984 collection is heavily dependent on Heaney's 1983 translation of the early Irish work *Buile Suibhne* (as *Sweeney Astray*). Like most people I came to this extraordinary series of poems and prose passages about the mad bird-man through Heaney's translation, and it was Heaney's inspired comparison, in his Introduction, of Sweeney's language with that of Poor Tom in *King Lear* that helped me to see that the mad outsider King Sweeney was the type and symbol of the *peregrinus* whom I needed, and that I was justified in finding the *peregrinus* figure in Shakespeare's late tragedies. My immersion in *Buile Suibhne* has however led me to a paradoxically critical view of the direction of *Station Island*.

Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* has only a subliminal presence in this book, but it comes out of the shadows for the discussion on doubt which is the subject of my concluding chapters. It is a largely comic novel, David Lodge's *Therapy*, which introduces Kierkegaard into the more or less continuous dispute between faith and doubt on the issue of pilgrimage. His hero, Laurence Passmore, feels that Kierkegaard's irrational 'leap into the void', which alone justifies faith, could explain and countenance what is happening to Margaret in her 'absurd' pilgrimage to Compostela. Many years ago I felt that in Kierkegaard's

irrational 'leap' lay the only way of understanding *Hamlet*, and I urged people to accept not that Hamlet was right to overcome his doubts about his visitor from Purgatory, but that he might possibly be right (see p. 209). It is in this arena of *possibility* that I see the real strength of pilgrimage literature. It is an arena full of uncertainty and doubt about pilgrimage itself, considered as a means of access to the divine, but just as pilgrimage 'on the ground' has survived a history of corruption and abuse, so pilgrimage in literature, even more resourceful, has insistently reasserted itself as faith and belief have inevitably ebbed away, and remains a dominating image of search for the impossible – or rather for possibility. In what may be the strongest of all the pilgrimage poems of the age of unbelief, 'Sailing to Byzantium', Yeats uses the extraordinary phrase 'the artifice of eternity'. 'Gather me', pleads his pilgrim-speaker, 'into the artifice of eternity'. Yeats said of his poem, in a late broadcast, that 'I symbolise the search for the spiritual life by a journey to that city' (Byzantium). What the poem's speaker looks for in Byzantium is a symbol or image of the spiritual life, a thing of art which may suggest to the world he has left behind a sense of that which outgoes the limits of ordinary experience. 'Eternity', in so far as it means a life beyond this life, 'from whose bourn no traveller returns', is necessarily an artifice, an imagined possibility conveyed by image and metaphor. 'Sailing to Byzantium' as a whole is in itself a triumphant example of the use of the metaphor of pilgrimage to create that world of possibility.

CHAPTER 1

Peregrinus

What do we mean by 'pilgrim' and 'pilgrimage'? For centuries past it has normally been understood that a pilgrimage is a journey, expected to be long and arduous, to a sacred place or a shrine, where the pilgrim hopes by a rite of communion to obtain spiritual benefit or divine assistance, or forgiveness, or a physical cure. Or the pilgrim may wish to give thanks for such assistance already received. This practice of making visits to sacred places, for various kinds of benefit, pre-dates Christianity, and is widespread in many religions.[1] It seems to be a universal urge. But curiously there are no pilgrims of this sort in the English Bible. The word occurs a number of times, but always with a different signification. The most important of these occurrences is in the Epistle to the Hebrews, 11:13–14. Here is the passage in the Authorised Version. The writer of the Epistle (his identity is not known) is speaking of those who lived before the coming of Christ, particularly Abraham, who was commanded by God to travel from his home 'unto a land that I will show thee'.

> These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.
>
> For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country.

These two verses have had a huge influence on the meaning of the word 'pilgrim' and on its allegorical uses over the centuries. John Wycliffe, or one of his disciples, translated this passage in the middle of the fourteenth century as follows. These worthy people 'knowlechide

[1] See, for example, Simon Coleman and John Elsner, *Pilgrimage Past and Present: Sacred Travel and Sacred Space in the World Religions* (London: British Museum Press, 1995).

that thei weren pilgryms, and herboryd men on the erthe' ('herboryd men' means 'harboured men', i.e., lodgers). Tyndale took over the word 'pilgrims' but emended the phrase to 'strangers and pilgrims'. And this phrase remained through all English versions, the Great Bible, the Geneva Bible, the Bishops' Bible, the Authorised Version and the Revised Version of 1881.[2]

'Strangers and pilgrims' is the Greek ξένοι καὶ παρεπίδημοί (xenoi kai parepidemoi). The Vulgate version is *peregrini et hospites*. Both these phrases suggest travellers who are temporarily residing in a territory which is not their own. Martin Luther (working from the Greek) accurately rendered the phrase as 'Gäste und Fremdlinge' [visiting strangers]. Though a French Bible of 1561 reads 'estrangers & pelerins', later versions are 'étrangers et voyageurs' and 'étrangers et forains'. The English Revised Standard Version of 1946 threw out the word 'pilgrims' and gave the phrase as 'strangers and exiles'. The New English Bible of 1961 reads 'strangers or passing travellers'. The New Revised Standard Version of 1989 has 'strangers and foreigners'.

Clearly, later translators have found the word 'pilgrims' confusing, though it was the direct rendering of '*peregrini*' ('pélerin' in French, 'pellegrino' in Italian, 'Pilger' in German, etc). Latin had no special word for one who journeyed to a sacred place, and the words '*peregrinus*' and '*peregrinatio*' had a basic set of meanings which are applicable in this passage and were correctly rendered by Luther and the later translators. '*Peregrinus*' meant a wanderer, a traveller from foreign parts, an alien, and it is in these senses that it is used in the Epistle to the Hebrews to translate the Greek, given above. The pre-Christian worthies considered themselves as exiles as they made their way through this world and this life. That the word 'pilgrim' meant just that is clear from a Lollard tract formerly attributed to Wycliffe: 'Euery citizen of the hevenli countre is a pilgrime of this world for al tyme of this present lijf.'[3]

[2] See *The New Testament Octapla*, ed. L. A. Weigle (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1962).

[3] *The Lanterne of Light*, ed. L. M. Swinburn, Early English Text Society, os 151 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, and Oxford University Press, 1917), pp. 85–6. Cf. Jonathan Sumption, *Pilgrimage: An Image of Mediaeval Religion* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1975; London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 300.

The author of the Epistle was transposing the sense of exile which suffuses the Old Testament – the Jews seeing themselves as a displaced people, enforced wanderers in search of the Promised Land, longing for a return to Zion, or Jerusalem – and allying it with the spirit of alienation from the life around them which inspired the early Christians, dedicated to a wholly new purpose. In doing this, he was pushing the word which means exile and was rendered as 'pilgrim' towards that same 'normal' definition which I gave at the head of this chapter. For the very word *exile* requires the concept of a homeland, to which the exile longs to return. 'For they that say such things', viz. that they are strangers and exiles, 'declare plainly that they seek a country' (11:14, AV). Abraham 'looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God' (11:10, NRSV). And that city is firmly identified with the spiritual destination of the new Christians. 'But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels' (12:22, AV). 'For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come' (13:14, AV). So those who are, metaphorically, *peregrini* (exiles or temporary residents or 'sojourners') are also (by extension of the metaphor) pilgrims in the narrower sense, being spiritual travellers to a heavenly destination. By means of this passage, *peregrini* became pilgrims in the customary sense, and all wayfaring pilgrims of the future became exiles.

The Epistle to the Hebrews was the bedrock for early Christian ideas on pilgrimage, and we need to explore further the implications of this central passage. But first there is another epistle to look at, another fundamental passage in which the Vulgate use of '*peregrini*' was expanded to embrace the concept of pilgrimage. This is the first Epistle of Peter, 2:11. 'Dearly beloved', writes the author, 'I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul.' So the Authorised Version. The Greek phrase for 'strangers and pilgrims' was παροίκους καὶ παρεπιδήμους (paroikous kai parepidemous), [foreign residents and strangers]. The Vulgate reads *advenas et peregrinos*. The New English Bible has 'aliens in a foreign land'. The New Revised Standard Version gives us 'aliens and exiles'. It is still a matter of debate to whom the Epistle is addressed.

Who are these Christians scattered in 'Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia'? They may include Christian converts who have gone from Palestine to live in Asia Minor in the diaspora after the killing of Stephen; they may include converted Jews who were already living in Asia Minor, or perhaps converted pagans from those parts. Insofar as they were Palestinian Jews they were indeed *peregrini*, aliens and exiles in a double sense: away from their homeland and also separated from their neighbours by their faith. But all of them were aliens and exiles by reason of their religion; they did not belong to the society in which they resided, they belonged to Christ. There is no suggestion in the text itself, whatever the early commentators thought was implied, that they were *peregrini* in that they were metaphorically pilgrims bound for heaven. Peter urges them 'to abstain from fleshly lusts'. It has been suggested that they were to refrain from carnal desire because they were embarked on a divine pilgrimage.[4] The injunction seems much more pragmatic. Their purity is their mark and their distinction. They are 'a peculiar people' (1 Peter 2:9, AV), and they are to show their distinction by maintaining their holiness among unbelieving pagans, who may by their example learn to glorify God (2:12).

It is the argument of Dee Dyas's important book, *Pilgrimage in Medieval English Literature, 700–1500* (2001), that the idea of 'life-pilgrimage' (that is, life conceived as a pilgrimage towards a heavenly destination) was embedded in the Bible and dominated the concept of pilgrimage in the early Christian centuries. She shows that what she calls 'place-pilgrimage' (that is, actual journeys to holy shrines) did not really begin among Christians until the late third century. Life-pilgrimage has both the precedence and the superior value; place-pilgrimage is secondary and subordinate. In her Conclusion she writes: 'it has become clear that the *primary* meaning of pilgrimage within Christian thought is concerned with the journey of individual believers through an alien world to the homeland of heaven' (p. 247). Elsewhere she writes: 'The place-oriented pilgrimages which

[4] See Dee Dyas, *Pilgrimage in Medieval English Literature 700–1500* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001), pp. 24–5.

multiplied so quickly during the fourth century ideally formed a part of that longer eternal journey' (p. 64).

Quite rightly, therefore, Dee Dyas questions the ordinary assumption that place-pilgrimages are literal journeys and that life-pilgrimage is a metaphor (p. 245). On the contrary, she argues, the journey of the soul towards union with Christ is the reality, and the physical journey to a shrine may be seen as a metaphor – 'a miniature version of that longer, more complex journey which every soul must choose to undertake' (p. 246). Dyas is anything but dogmatic on this question – which is the reality and which is the metaphor? – but it seems essential to pursue the matter further.

The 'eternal journey' of the Christian soul was indeed the ultimate reality. Territorial pilgrims were acting out scenes which copied *in parvo* the desired structure of their whole lives. The renunciation of friends and family, and the commitment to strange and hostile territory in order to reach the relics of a saint, might well be thought a metaphor for the moral dedication and struggle of a whole Christian life. As Duffy argues, 'Late medieval men and women were . . . well aware of the symbolic value of pilgrimage as a ritual enactment and consecration of their whole lives.'[5] Nevertheless, the manner in which the destiny of the Christian soul was defined was also metaphorical. The image of territorial pilgrimage was supplied by the earliest readers to texts in which they thought it inhered, though, as we have seen, these texts did not expressly declare it.

It will be granted that in the Epistle to the Hebrews the condition of exile in which the newly converted Christians found themselves is a metaphor – and that this metaphor is within the text. Spiritual alienation was given its meaning by being grounded in the literal situation of the Jewish people. And, as an exile longs for home, the Christian longs for union with Christ. The new covenant was explained metaphorically: an ethereal transposition of a known physical state. There is no doubt that what the Christians believed they had access to was the higher reality, but that higher reality was forced to find

[5] Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c. 1400–c. 1580* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 192.

expression in the concreteness of the common experiences of life – in this case the condition of exile. The ease of movement between the physical and the spiritual is remarkably evident in the doubtfulness of the commentators on the Petrine epistle whether those *peregrini* who are to abstain from fleshly lusts are geographical exiles or spiritual exiles. And as spiritual apartness finds itself in the metaphor of physical exile, so the passage of the soul of the spiritual exile to its ultimate solace was voiced as a journey.

The words of Christ prepare us for the metaphor of the journey in which the author of Hebrews conveyed the struggle and hope of the new covenant. 'Seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you . . . Strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life' (Matthew 7:7, 14). And when Thomas grasps as it were a portion of the meaning of this metaphoric language, Christ magnificently drives home its fullness.

> Thomas saith unto him, Lord, we know not whither thou goest; and how can we know the way?
>
> Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life; no man cometh unto the Father, but by me. (John 14:5–6)

The metaphoric Christian journey in Hebrews was a journey with a holy destination. The *peregrini* who undertook this journey were, metaphorically, exiles and 'sojourners'. It seems inevitable that the metaphorical language of the epistle should become extended, and that the journey should be characterised in terms of the territorial journey of the pilgrim to a sacred shrine. For this to be the case, 'pilgrimage' would need to share with 'exile' a real state on the ground (as it were) before it could be used as a symbol.

It will be said that for the original readers of the epistle, who established so firmly the understanding that the progress of the Christian soul was a pilgrimage, there were no pilgrimages 'on the ground' to serve as metaphoric fodder for the concept of life-pilgrimage. But the sweat and trudge along the exhausting road to a sacred place where lies a hope of relief is too deeply embedded in human life for it *not* to be available as a metaphor. The drift of the epistle is to present the new covenant of Christianity as a spiritual replacement of