Raymond Williams’s relationship to Marxism went through two phases, separated by a long interlude. The first was natural. It followed the contours of his class origins. Born in 1922 in a rural region of Wales, son of a Labour Party railwayman who was active in the 1926 General Strike (Williams describes this episode in his best novel, *Border Country*), his political engagement in the British workers’ movement was, in a sense, natural. This phase culminated with his arrival at Cambridge University in 1939, where he joined the most active of the far-left groups, the Young Communists, and began his career in political and cultural journalism. In this period, Williams’s Marxism was that of the Third International, determinist and dogmatic, and fed into a reductionist critique of the dominant liberal and reactionary trends in his discipline of literary studies. It was not long before Williams found these simplifications irksome. After the War, in which he served in field artillery, he did not renew his membership of the Communist Party of Great Britain, but remained loyal to his origins, becoming one of the British intellectuals from a working-class background viscerally attached to left-wing ideas – to their social origin. Politically,
he was situated on the left of the labour movement. Intellectually, he was influenced by the school of literary criticism associated with the journal *Scrutiny* (around F.R. Leavis), which combined close reading with an attempt to reconstruct the canon on ethical bases (Leavis’s best-known work was entitled *Revaluation*). The school was also concerned with popular culture (albeit in disapproving mode): Williams would remember this excursion off the beaten track.

The second phase began with the early 1960s. At the time, Williams was known as an historian and theoretician of culture. He studied literature not as a succession of great works – a canon – but as a cultural formation, determined by the history of the society in which it was inserted and determining it in return. This shift was of the greatest importance in that it subsequently gave rise to the discipline of ‘cultural studies’, of which Williams must be considered the creator. He was already the author of two authoritative works, *Culture and Society* (1957) and *The Long Revolution* (1961). These books contain references to Marxism, but somewhat in the fashion of a nostalgic passing acknowledgement. The situation changed radically towards the mid-1960s – a period in which British Marxism underwent a spectacular revival. First of all, because a core of indigenous Marxist historians began to produce outstanding works (for instance, E.P. Thompson, a friend of Williams, with his *The Making of the English Working Class* in 1963), but above all because on the ruins of the British Communist Party – abandoned after 1956 by the majority of its intellectuals – there arose a New Left, highly influential among intellectuals, whose organ was *New Left Review*. Thanks to this journal, resolutely internationalist in the cultural sphere, the British intelligentsia discovered Continental Marxism in its numerous varieties: courtesy of it, Lukács, Goldmann, Adorno, Gramsci, Althusser, and many others were translated and published. Williams participated in this development. He was a member of the editorial committee and wrote in the *Review*, whose positions he defended against the temptations of Anglocentric involution (from which Thompson, for example, was not immune: cf. his violent attack on Althusser). At the same time, he resumed political activity, and joined the Labour Party and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. For Great Britain and its left-wing intellectuals (of whom Williams is archetypal), the 1960s (the ‘swinging sixties’) were prosperous years, both politically (election of a majority Labour government under Harold Wilson) and culturally (avant-garde theatre from Osborne to Pinter;