Our notion of culture, which has a foundational significance for most of the disciplines of humanities, is a typically modern concept. To formulate it in a preliminary and intentionally paradoxical way: this concept to a large extent reflects the ambiguities, uncertainties and contradictions that pertain to modernity as culture; it articulates and simultaneously veils, masks the difficulties and the precariousness of the very project of cultural modernity. These ambivalencies and difficulties manifest themselves not only in the now familiar observation that “culture” gains its meaning from an opposition to “nature”, an opposition as necessary as conceptually untenable, self-deconstructing. For in fact each of these two conceptual extremes is equally rent by multiple (interrelated, but irreducible), explicit or implicit oppositions of the same character: each of them possesses meaning through a series of systematic distinctions that in no way can be brought to coherent unity. We are, however – and this is the most important point to make – not dealing here only with the systematic ambiguities of a static semantic-conceptual field, ambiguities quite common in the case of
concepts constituted by relations of “family” ‒type. For these become transformed into active contradictions ‒ dynamic antinomies ‒, around which centre two opposed tendencies, cultural processes and programs, each of which attempts to resolve these ambiguities in its own way. The culture of modernity is imprinted and defined by the irreconcilable coexistence and struggle of these two projects. I shall call them “Enlightenment” and “Romanticism”, using these terms merely as abstract ideal types: the concrescence of these opposites is manifested, among other things, in the fact that it would be difficult to think of any significant thinker of the modern age who could in all respects be unambiguously situated on the one side of this divide.

Speaking about our concept of culture I mean a use of this term that no more refers to a state of (individual or collective) cultivation – in its opposition both to the savage, primitive and to the overrefined, decadent – but designates everything that as inheritable human work and accomplishment fundamentally distinguishes the human way of existence from that of the animals: “culture” as embodied in those results of social practices, human-made material and ideal objectivations that – in opposition to the senseless facticity of the phenomena of “nature” ‒ are endowed with, and transmit, meanings.

There is a well-known narrative that explains the emergence of this conception (which actually took place around the end of the eighteenth century). An instrumental-pragmatic conception of knowledge as power, as tool of mastery – itself, of course, conditioned by those basic social changes that inaugurated early modernity – destroyed the traditional conception of nature as meaningful cosmos or divine creation, as the source of norms. It was henceforth no longer possible to understand the propriety or value of human actions on the basis of their correspondence or non-correspondence to assumed “natural laws”. From now on it is nature (a mere “standing in reserve” for all forms of human “making”) whose meaning for us must be understood in terms of the requirements and potential of our activities. This transformation alone, however, would leave human actions without any binding, common standard and orientation. The concept of “culture” is invented in order to make up this norm- and value-deficit. Simultaneously it also consummates the self-understanding of human beings as makers. We not only transform nature according to our ends, but also sovereignly create these ends and, indeed, the whole system of meanings in terms of which we