One of the main difficulties in every discussion concerning barbarism seems to be what Reinhart Koselleck has called the “asymmetrical” structure of the relation between the concept of barbarism and its antithesis (211-59). Barbarism, in its current significance, is supposed to represent the opposite of culture or civilization, but the term barbarism could only have been coined and can only be used in a cultural context as well as in the name of culture; otherwise it seems to have no meaning at all. This has two important and interrelated consequences. Firstly, one can only speak of barbarism if one thinks of oneself as belonging to a culture. The very use of the term determines and indicates the side one necessarily speaks from. Secondly, it seems to be logically impossible to use the concept of barbarism with a self-descriptive purpose. And—most importantly—it would be out of place to accuse somebody of barbarism, without being aware of the communicative futility of such an accusation. The reason is that if the accused person were a real barbarian, there would be no hope for him to accept or even to understand the accusation, as his barbarism makes him unable to apply the concept to himself. By calling someone a barbarian, we declare our resignation from the task of meaningful communication. But if we do this, then we have to admit that we have ceased to act as exponents of culture. Surprisingly, in our effort to distinguish our position from barbarism, we have abandoned the goal of comprehensibility and have become a kind of barbarians ourselves. But, as we have already seen, no barbarian can become conscious of his barbarism, which means that no culture is legitimized to represent itself as free from its opposite. In this sense, we are obliged to admit that culture is, and is condemned to be, contaminated with barbarism. In that case, if we do not want to drop the
distinction as well as the term altogether, we have to search for ways to handle the emerging paradox.

Indeed, the history of the concept is full of such paradoxes. This is especially true of the German philosophical tradition, to which Walter Benjamin also belongs. Although there have been various attempts to cope with these paradoxes, I will try to simplify matters, by presenting two main lines in the German theory of culture. The first line, initiated perhaps by Friedrich Schiller, could be called the dialectical one. From our point of view in this essay, it is characterized by the attempt to solve the problem of the oxymoron by denying the externality of the terms barbarism and civilization in relation to each other and by conceiving barbarism as a certain mode of culture or cultural failure. Barbarism does not indicate a threat originating somewhere outside of the cultural sphere anymore. It rather represents a gap between real culture and its true concept, an internal insufficiency of culture or civilization, which Schiller, by departing from Kantian rigorist ethics, does not ascribe to a lack of reason but to a despotic government of moral principles over feelings, to a tyranny of reason over nature. Thus, for Schiller, the term barbarism describes a certain stage of cultural development, before history achieves its final goal after having cultivated culture itself. The figure of such a cultivation of culture remains crucially important even in the work of such a late theorist as Theodor W. Adorno. Adorno, a close friend of Benjamin, radicalizes Schiller’s dialectical scheme, arriving consciously at an aporetical construction (Adorno 17–34).

Adorno maintains that the immanence of barbarism in the logic of culture undermines the whole project of immanent cultural criticism; culture remains barbaric even after having accomplished its self-critical task. Nevertheless, any transcendent critique of culture, any critique carried out with external standards, presents an even worse choice, inasmuch as it throws the baby out with the bath water and develops, in Adorno’s own words, an “affinity to barbarism” or even worse a naive and fateful identification with the aggressor, while the exact original intention was to criticize culture as untrue to itself, this is to say, as barbaric (32). According to Adorno’s anti-idealistic attitude towards the problem of culture, barbarism could only be defined as culture’s own failure to distinguish between itself and its antithesis. Even in this—let us say—ultra-dialectical form, the concept of barbarism retains its classical negative connotations. It signifies the internal sumnum malum of culture, which has been transformed into its very opposite.

Friedrich Nietzsche may be the first great philosopher who tried to free the term barbarism from such a pejorative use and to employ it as a sign for the only effective antidote to the illness and decline of Western civilization. From this point of view he inaugurates a second, divergent line in the German and European cultural thought. It is a ‘divergent,’ not an entirely new line, because Nietzsche still uses the word barbarism in order to characterize the outcome of the self-destructive development of