

## Jean-Marie Blas de Roblès

### *Where Tigers Feel at Home* (*Là où les tigres sont chez eux*)

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TRANSLATED FROM FRENCH  
BY EDWARD GAUVIN



**Biography:** *Globetrotter and polyglot, Jean-Marie Blas de Roblès is a specialist in submarine archaeology. After studying philosophy and history, he wrote La mémoire de riz et autres contes (Seuil, 1982), which received the Académie française award for short stories.*

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“Many times when a certain longing curiosity about these strange objects has come over me, I have envied the traveller who sees such marvels in living, every-day connection with other marvels. But he, too, must have become another man. Palm-trees will not allow a man to wander among them with impunity; and doubtless his tone of thinking becomes very different in a land where elephants and tigers are at home.”

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Elective Affinities* (trans. Victoria Claflin Woodhull, 1872)

## PROLOGUE

Alcântara: The Pillory

“Pointedly man swells! Squaaawk! Pointedly man swells!” came Heidegger’s shrill, nasal, almost inebriated screech.

Suddenly furious, Eléazard von Wogau looked up from his reading; pivoting halfway around on his chair, he grabbed the first book he found and, with all his strength,

hurled it at the creature. At the other end of the room, in a mighty and colorful flurry, the parrot rose just high enough above his perch to avoid the projectile. Father Reilly's *Studia Kiercheriana* crashed into the table beyond, knocking over a half-empty bottle of *cachaça*. It shattered, immediately dousing the disheveled book.

“Dammit,” muttered Eléazard.

He waited a moment before getting up to try and rescue his book from ruin, met the Sartrean stare of the great macaw who, head cocked absurdly back and mad of eye, was pretending to look for something in his plumage; then decided to go back to Caspar Schott's manuscript.

Extraordinary, really, when you considered it, that such discoveries were still possible: a never-before-seen manuscript unearthed during a recent inventory at the National Library in Palermo. The current curator had deemed the contents of the work in question not worthy of more than a brief article in the library's quarterly bulletin, accompanied by a note from the director of the local Goethe Institute. Only through a phenomenal series of circumstances had a photocopy of the manuscript—written in French by an obscure German Jesuit on the subject of another, no less neglected Jesuit—ended up on Eléazard's desk in Brazil. In a sudden fit of zeal, the director of the Goethe Institute had taken it upon himself to pass the thing on to Werner Küntzel, a Berliner who had for several years now been working to formulate a computing theory, trying to show how binary code had its roots in Lullian scholasticism and its later variants, notably those of Athanasius Kircher. Always inclined to enthusiasm, Küntzel had straightaway proposed that Thomas Sessler Books publish the manuscript. Balking at the translation costs, the publisher had acceded to the idea of a limited edition of the original, and on the

advice of Werner himself had turned to Eléazard, entrusting him with the text for editing and commentary.

Werner, you old devil! Eléazard smiled despite himself, he really had no idea...

He hadn't seen him since the now already hazy era of their encounter in Heidelberg, but had a perfect memory of his weaselly face and the nervous tic that made his cheek leap with a small, obscene quiver of maxillary muscle. The phenomenon betrayed tension suppressed but ready, it seemed, for violent expression, such that Eléazard sometimes forgot what he was saying: a result that was perhaps his conversational partner's more-or-less deliberate goal. They had corresponded infrequently, if fairly formally on Werner's part, for Werner had never gotten more than a postcard or two in response to long letters in which he related his life and achievements in detail. Decidedly, Werner had no idea how much Eléazard's life had changed, nor what resources had needed to be mobilized in order to reunite him with his old loves. He probably knew Kircher's work better than anyone—fifteen years of studying a perfect nobody usually procured you such dubious honors—but Werner didn't suspect how far he'd drifted, over time, from his youthful ambitions. Eléazard had long since consigned the thesis he'd been working in Heidelberg to oblivion, although he still invoked its shadow as the only motive behind an obsession that always managed to take him a bit by surprise. Time to face facts: some people collected whisky bottles or cigarette packs though they'd quit drinking or smoking, and he now made do amassing, with similar compulsiveness, anything even remotely related to his loony Jesuit. First editions, engravings, papers and articles, scattered quotations, they all served to fill the void occasioned by the now-distant renunciation of his studies. It was his way of keeping the

faith, of continuing to honor, if only derisively, a thirst for knowledge he'd once failed to prove himself worthy of, once upon a time.

“Soledade!” he shouted, without turning around.

It didn't take the young mulatto girl long to show her funny face, beaming like a clown's.

“Yes, *senhor*?” she said mellifluously, in a voice that clearly wondered what someone could want of her so suddenly.

“Can you make me a caipirinha, please?”

“*Pode preparar me uma caipirinha, por favor?*” Soledad repeated, mimicking his accent and errors of syntax.

Eléazard asked her again, with raised eyebrow, but she threatened him with a finger, as if to say, “You're incorrigible!”

“Yes, *senhor*,” she replied before disappearing, not without making a face and poking out one end of her little pink tongue.

Half-African and half-Indian—*cabloca*, as they called it here—Soledad had been born in a village in Sertão. She was only eighteen, but she'd been turned out in early adolescence to help feed her brothers and sisters, of which she had too many. For five years now, drought had been running rampant in the interior; farmers were reduced to eating snakes and cacti, but before resolving to leave their small patches of land, they preferred to send their children to the coast, to the big cities where they might at least beg a little. Soledade had been luckier than most: supported by a cousin of her father's, she'd found work as a maid with a Brazilian family. Shamefully exploited, beaten for the slightest deviation from her masters' orders, she'd gladly agreed to work for a Frenchman

who'd noticed her over a *feijoada* with his coworkers. Denis Raffanel had been more taken with her smile, her silky black skin, and her marvelous young body than with her qualities as a housekeeper, but he had treated her with kindness, even respect, such that she'd been perfectly happy with her doubled salary and minimal duties. Three months earlier, Eléazard's divorce had serendipitously coincided with the providential Frenchman's departure. Partly to please Raffanel, but mainly because he felt lonely, he'd asked Soledade to work for him. Because she knew him from seeing him often over at Raffanel's, because he himself was French, and because she'd rather have died than ever work for Brazilians again, Soledade said yes right away, demanding the same pay—a pittance, actually—and a color TV. Eléazard had submitted to her requests, and one fine morning she'd moved in.

Soledade took care of laundry, shopping, and cooking, cleaned the house when she felt like it—which was rarely—and spent the better part of her time watching insipid soap operas on TV Globo, the national channel. As for the “special” services she'd provided her former employer, Eléazard had never asked. He'd never even set foot in the small room she'd made her own, less from kindness than indifference, for which she seemed grateful.

He watched her come back, once more admiring her insouciant step, that wholly African way of almost gliding across the floor with an annoying slap of sandals. She set the glass on his desk, made another face at him, and left.

While nursing his brew—Soledade mixed lime and *cachaça* to perfection—Eléazard let his gaze sweep over the broad window across from him. It directly overlooked the jungle, or more precisely the *mata*, that luxuriance of tall trees, twisted

vines, and vegetation that had reclaimed the city without anyone lifting a finger. From the second floor, Eléazard had the feeling of plunging into the organic heart of things, a bit like a surgeon surveying a stomach opened to his inquisitive gaze. When he'd decided to leave São Luis and buy a house in Alcântara, he'd been spoiled for choice. The old baroque city, the jewel of eighteenth century architecture in Brazil, was falling into ruin. Abandoned by history since the fall of the Marquis of Pombal, swallowed by forest, insects, and damp, it was inhabited only by a meager population of fishermen, too poor to live anywhere but in shacks of clay, oil drums, and corrugated metal, or half-collapsed hovels. From time to time a grower turned up, dazed from having so abruptly left the rainforest behind, to sell his crop of mangoes or papayas to buyers commuting to São Luis. This was where Eléazard had bought his massive, dilapidated house, one of those *sobrados* that had once contributed to the city's beauty. He'd obtained it for what had seemed to him a handful of breadcrumbs, but which for most Brazilians was a hefty sum. The façade gave directly on the Pillory, with the abandoned São Matias church on the left, and on the right, also open to all weathers, the Casa de Câmara e Cadeia, or town hall and prison. In the middle of the plaza, between these two ruins of which nothing remained but roof and walls, the Pillory still stood, that dwarf column of overdecorated stone where recalcitrant slaves had once been whipped. Tragic emblem of civil and religious oppression, of the blindness that had led certain men in good conscience to slaughter thousands of their fellows, the *pelourinho* alone among the town's monuments had remained intact. And though pigs were allowed to run free inside the church and the town hall, not one of the resident *cablocos* would've tolerated the slightest affront to this badge of age-old suffering, injustice, and stupidity. For nothing had changed, nothing would

ever topple those three staggering pillars of human nature, and locals recognized in the column that had defied the ravages of time the symbol of their own poverty and decline.

Elaine—leave it to Brazil to come up with such names—his wife Elaine had never been able to stand this place where everything bore, like a stigmata, the mildew of decay, and this gut rejection had no doubt played its part in their separation. Yet another of the many flaws he'd suddenly found himself blamed for one evening last September. The whole time she was talking, the only image he'd had in his head was of the house, chewed through by termites, abruptly crumbling without any detectable warning sign of the disaster. The very idea of defending himself failed so much as to occur to him, as it doubtless never does to those unhappiness one day slaps right in the face: do we try and justify ourselves to an earthquake, or an exploding mortar shell? When his wife, that sudden stranger, had demanded divorce, Eléazard had submitted, signing everything asked of him, acquiescing to all the lawyers' requests, as a refugee lets himself be moved from camp to camp. Their daughter Moema hadn't been a problem, since she was of age and already leading her own life, if you could call her way of dodging necessities day in and day out "leading a life."

Eléazard had decided to stay in Alcântara, and it was only recently, six months after Elaine had left for Brasilia, that he'd begun going through the debris of his marriage, looking less for what might still be saved than for the origins of such a mess.

When he thought about it, it seemed Werner's offer had come at just the right time. Working on Caspar Schott's manuscript gave him a safeguard, forcing therapeutic concentration and determination on him. And if he weren't, or never would be able to forget, at least this allowed him to space out the sudden bouts of resurgent memories.

Once more, Eléazard flipped through the first chapter of the *Life of Athanasius Kircher*, rereading his notes and skimming certain passages. Christ, it got off to a bad start. There was nothing more exasperating than the stuffy voice of hagiography that here reached the heights of platitude. All these pages reeked of cassocks and candle wax. And the author's obnoxious way of spotting destiny's early warning signs in childhood! That kind of thing always worked in hindsight. Frreaakin' annooying, as Moema said about anything that infringed in even the slightest on what she called freedom, but which was in fact only unreasonable, pathological selfishness. Only Friedrich von Spee seemed likeable, despite the inanity of his poems.

"The man's prick is cocked! Squaaawk! Squaaawk!" the parrot shrieked again, as though he'd been waiting for the moment when his interruption might have the greatest effect.

As stupid as he is iridescent, thought Eléazard, eyeing the animal disdainfully. A fairly common paradox, alas, and hardly unique to the great Amazonian macaw.

He'd finished his caipirinha. A second—a third?—would've been welcome, but he hesitated at the thought of bothering Soledade again. After all, *Soledade*, in Portuguese, meant "solitude." I live alone with solitude, he uttered silently. There were pleonasms that contained something like an excess of truth. It could've been a quote from the *Roman de la Rose*: "When Reason hears me, it turns away, leaving me pensive and alone."

## **CHAPTER 1**

*In which we treat of the birth and youthful years of Athanasius Kircher, the hero of this tale.*

On this day dedicated to Saint Genevieve, the third in the year of our Lord 1690, I, Caspar Schott, seated like a common schoolboy at one of the library tables in my charge, undertake to relate the life, exemplary in every way, of the Reverend Father Athanasius Kircher. This man, whose edifying works have left like a seal upon history the mark of his intellect, has humbly faded from view behind his books: I will be thanked—my soul aspires thereto—for lifting this veil gently aside and casting a modest light on a fate that fame has already made immortal.

As I embark on so arduous a task, it is in commending my destiny to Mary, our mother, whose name Athanasius never took in vain, that I take up my pen to give life once more to this man who was my master for fifty years and bestowed on me the favor, dare I boast of it, of true friendship.

Athanasius Kircher was born at three o'clock in the morning, on the second day of the month of May, the feast day of Saint Athanasius, in the year of our Lord 1602. His parents, Jean Kircher and Anna Gansekin, were devout and generous Catholics. At the time of his birth, they were living in Geisa, a small market town three hours overland from Fulda.

Athanasius Kircher came into this world at the onset of an era of relative harmony, born into a close and pious family, in an atmosphere of study and contemplation that no doubt played its part in his future calling. All the more so, for Jean Kircher possessed a well-stocked library, and the child Athanasius was always surrounded by books. It was with emotion and gratitude that he would later recall to me certain titles he'd had in hand

in Geisa, in particular the *De Laudibus Sanctae Crucis* of Raban Maur, with which he'd practically taught himself to read.

Naturally gifted, the schoolboy mastered the most difficult subjects as though playing at them, yet nevertheless applied himself so wholly that he surpassed his peers right and left. Not a day went by when he didn't return from school with some new award pinned to his habit, decorations of which his father was quite rightfully proud. First in his class, he aided the schoolmaster in explaining the catechism of Canisius to beginners and made them recite their lessons to subalterns. At the age of eleven, he was already reading the Gospels and Plutarch in the original. At twelve, he won hands-down all public debates in Latin, declaiming like no other, and composing prose and verse in an astounding manner.

Athanasius held tragedy in high esteem and, at the age of thirteen, for a particularly brilliant translation from the Hebrew, he obtained permission from his father to travel to Aschaffenburg with his fellow students for a theatrical performance: a group of traveling players were putting on Flavius Mauricius, Emperor of the Orient. Jean Kircher entrusted the small group to a peasant headed for the small town in his cart—two days' march from Geisa—who would bring them back once the performance was over.

Athanasius was excited by the actors' talent and their truly magical ability to bring to life a figure he had always admired. Onstage, before his bedazzled eyes, the valorous successor to Tiberius defeated the Persians once more in thunder and fury; he harangued his troops and chased Slavs and Avars across the Danube, at last restoring the Empire's grandeur. And in the last act, when Phocas the traitor put the exemplary

Christian to a horrible end, sparing neither his wife nor his son, the crowd would have needed but little excuse to rend the actor playing the vile centurion limb from limb.

With all the passion of youth, Athanasius took up Mauricius' cause, and when it was time to return to Geisa, our little featherbrain refused to join his friends in the wagon. The peasant who'd been charged with the children tried in vain to catch him: aspiring to a noble death and burning with desire to match his model's virtue, Athanasius Kircher had decided to face all by himself, like a hero of yore, the forest of Spessart, only all too well-known for its highwaymen, not to mention the fierce beasts that dwelled in its depths.

Once in the woods, it was not more than two hours before he was lost. All day long he wandered, trying to find the road he'd taken the other way, but the weald around him seemed to thicken, and it was with terror in his heart that he beheld the coming of the night. Terrified by the chimerae his imagination summoned from the darkness, cursing his own silly pride which had plunged him into this adventure, Athanasius climbed atop a tree to protect himself from fierce beasts, at least. There he spent the night, clinging to a branch, praying to God with all his soul, trembling with fear and remorse. Morning found him more dead than alive from fear and anguish, and he struck into the forest once more. He wandered for nine hours in this fashion, staggering from tree to tree, when the woods began to thin out and a vast plain appeared in the distance. Filled with joy, Kircher went to ask the harvesters working in the field where he was: the place he sought was still two days' march away! They pointed him in the right direction, giving him a few provisions, and it was five days after he left Aschaffenburg that he returned to Geisa at last, to the great relief of his parents, who'd believed him lost forever.

His patience having worn thin, Athanasius' father decided to send him to continue his studies as a boarder at the Jesuit College at Fulda.

Discipline there was surely stricter than at the small school in Geisa, but the magisters demonstrated greater knowledge, and managed to satisfy the young Kircher's insatiable curiosity. There was also the town itself, rich in history and architecture, Saint Michael's church with its two asymmetrical bell towers and, above all, the library that Raban Maur had founded long ago with his own books, where Athanasius spent the greater part of his free time. In addition to Maur's own works—in particular the original copies of the *De Universo* and *In Praise of the Holy Cross*—it contained all sorts of rare manuscripts such as the *Song of Hildebrand*, the *Codex Ragyndrudis*, the *Panarion* of Epiphanius, the *Summa* of William of Ockham, and even a copy of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, which Athanasius never opened without a shiver.

He spoke to me often of that last book each time his thoughts dwelled on his childhood friend Friedrich von Spee Langenfeld. This young professor taught at the seminary in Fulda; seeing qualities in Kircher that distinguished him from his peers, he didn't wait long before taking him under his wing. Through him, Athanasius discovered the library's underworld: Martial, Terence, Petronius... Von Spee introduced him to all the authors decency forbade innocent souls from reading, and if the schoolboy emerged from this dubious test only fortified in his aspirations to virtue, his magister was no less guilty of having exposed him, for "vice is like tar, and sticks to our fingers as soon as we touch it." All the more reason to forgive von Spee this slight infringement of morality, for he had only a beneficent influence on Kircher: did they not walk together, every Sunday, up the Frauenberg—the mountain of the Blessed Virgin—to engage in private prayer in

an abandoned cloister and converse about the world, contemplating the mountains and the town below?

As for the *Malleus Maleficarum*, Athanasius perfectly recalled his young mentor's wrath at the cruel and arbitrary treatment inflicted on those allegedly possessed by demons, once in the clutches of the Inquisition.

“Who would not confess to killing his father and mother, or to fornicating with a demon, when his feet are crushed in iron boots or his body perforated everywhere by long needles meant to find the painless point that proves, as the fools will have it, his acquaintance with the devil?”

And it was the student who found himself forced to calm his master's fervor, exhorting him to great prudence in his words. Von Spee would then begin whispering while on the mountain, citing Ponzibinio, Weier, or Cornelius Loos to support his argument. He was not the first, he insisted, to criticize the inhuman practices of the inquisitors; Johann Ervich had already denounced ordeal by water in 1584, Jordaneus the ordeal of the indelible stain, and as he said this, passion mounted in von Spee, his voice rising, leaving the young Athanasius terrified even as his admiration for his master's mad courage grew.

“You see, my friend,” von Spee exclaimed, his eyes gleaming, “for every true witch—and I will go so far as question if ever there was one—there are three thousand weak minds, three thousand raging minds whose woes are more the province of doctors than inquisitors. What lets these cruel so-called scholars win out is the pretext of interest in God and religion. But they do no more than reveal their terrible ignorance, and if they

attribute all these sufferings to supernatural causes, it is because they know not the natural laws that govern all things!”

While he was alive, Kircher would tell me again and again of his fascination for this man, and the influence the latter had exercised on his intellectual development. Sometimes, the young magister read selections aloud from the magnificent poems he was then writing, including those gathered, after his death, in the volumes *Stubborn Nightingale* and the *Golden Book of Virtue*. Athanasius knew several among them by heart, and on certain nights of distress in Rome, would allow himself to recite a few in a low voice, as one might an orison. He had a marked liking for “The Idolater,” a poem whose Egyptian hues particularly delighted him. I seem to hear his voice speak the words still, gravely and with restraint:

Plume-shaped Ishtar, have a care!  
Dark star, lunar benefactor,  
Shining feverishly o’er the sorb!  
Wise unicorn, child of seven dreams,  
Hyena and salamander, sacrificed glyph,  
Let us dance the chaconne, stubborn gossip:

A guilty man freezes in bull’s blood  
In the noisy den where Jesus baptizes him...  
Mortify, Savior, he who greedily desires

the Innominate!

He would close his eyes and remain silent, ravished by the beauty of the lines or some nameless memory their reading recalled. I would then use the opportunity to slip away, sure as I was of seeing him the next day in his usual good humour.

In the year of our Lord 1616, von Spee was transferred to the Jesuit College at Paderborn to complete his novitiate, and Athanasius, suddenly tired of Fulda, decided to go to Mainz and study philosophy.

The winter of 1617 was particularly severe. The city of Mainz groaned beneath the weight of snows; the nearby rivers were all frozen. Athanasius threw himself headlong into studying philosophy—especially Aristotle's, which he loved and absorbed with astonishing alacrity. But made wary at Fulda by his fellow students' sometimes brutal reactions to his perceptiveness and wit, Athanasius worked in secret and refused to demonstrate his knowledge. Feigning humility and even stupidity, he passed for a plodding student hobbled by his powers of comprehension.

A few months after his arrival in Mainz, Kircher showed a desire to enter the Society of Jesus. As he was not, at least by all appearances, gifted, this required his father's intervention with Johann Copper, Superior General of the Rhineland, in order that his application be accepted. The day of his departure for the novitiate of Paderborn was delayed until the fall of 1618, after his final exams in philosophy. Athanasius greeted the news with joy; the prospect of being reunited with his friend von Spee no doubt played its part.