

Occhi  
che sono  
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di vista  
sul  
mondo

DEIN TRAUM,

ZART WIE  
FEIDE,

BLEIBT ES ABER,

EINER  
ROMAN ZU SCHREIBEN

*Written by* **Roland Schwarz**

English Translation

### **Un Sortilegio di Amore**

Creative writing has been a firm fixture on university teaching timetables in the English-speaking world for decades. In Europe, however, this discipline still has some growing up to do. And yet it seems there is an urgent need to help young people to develop their love of writing, to find their own literary voice and to explore the many career possibilities offered by the wide field of textual art, from journalism and script-writing to the classic writer's career. Great credit is due to the novelist Alessandro Baricco and some of his friends for the establishment of a prestigious institution for emerging wordsmiths in Turin in the mid-1990s: the Scuola Holden. A young man from Sicily graduated from this very place in 2023 and is now pursuing a career as a novelist. He was inspired to do so by the novel *Seta*, in English, *Silk*. The author of this book is none other than the founder of the Piemontese writing workshop mentioned above.

Antonio comes from the small village of Canicatti in the heart of Sicily. After finishing school he studied journalism in the port city of Messina in the north-east of the island. When he finished his studies (it was 2020 and he had just turned 22), a lockdown brought life in Europe to a

standstill. It was an exceptional situation, and Antonio returned home. Shortly afterwards he discovered a thin little book in his parents' living room, with a title that spoke to him: *Silk* by Alessandro Baricco. He started to read, finished the book in an afternoon, and started again at the beginning, this time more slowly and deliberately. While letting the language wash over him, he had a moment of inspiration – James Joyce would have called it an Epiphany – and made a decision: *«I want to write books as beautiful as this one day. I am going to be a writer!»*

He started finding out where he could get the appropriate training to make this dream come true. The name Baricco led him to the famous Scuola Holden in Turin, named after the main character in J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*. A quick reminder: Holden Caulfield strives for an individualistic life beyond the normal. His character sets the programme: here in Turin, everyone is allowed to discover their own literary voice, whether in narrative prose, through a focus on film and tv or even the genre of the feuilleton. However, the demand for this kind of training is high and every year the school has well over 100 applicants for a maximum 30 places. The selection process is competitive: among other things, applicants must submit a literary self-portrait and visualise a short story. But Antonio is lucky: he is one of the chosen ones and in January 2021 he moves to Turin, out of his comfort zone and into the life of a writer.

*«Moving by myself from a small village in Sicily to a north Italian metropolis was quite a culture shock»*, he admits. But it was the right move, and now he could learn the art of storytelling from his idol Baricco. It was what he had somehow been wanting for a long time: learning to turn writing into his livelihood.

The novel *Silk*, published in 1996, was translated into dozens of languages and became an international best-seller. It is a thin, delicate book, actually more of a novella than a novel. The protagonist Hervé Joncour is a silkworm trader. In order to acquire the precious silkworm eggs, he travels halfway around the world from the South of France to Japan once a year. There he meets a girl, a mysterious beauty, but they are unable to touch or even speak to each other. Her secret glances alone spark a blind yearning which he cannot comprehend. His love remains a ghostly illusion, an unquenchable longing, a tantalising dream.

*«When I started to read this book, I was immediately mesmerised: the style, the poetic language, the musical cadence, the rhythm of the narrative. I was blown away. I had never read anything like this before. It touched me very deeply.»* Antonio beams when he talks about the book. He, too, would like to be able to write such beautiful stories one day.

In the novella certain principles are repeated, mantra-like, putting the reader at ease, drawing them into the story, into this sweet dream about nothing. The love which Hervé Joncour travels around the globe for remains a blind longing, an insatiable desire. The protagonist is an anti-hero, a phlegmatic who does nothing from his own volition; as it says in the novel, he is someone who is simply «present» in his own life. As a reader one wants to grab him by the shoulders and shake him awake. One despairs at the lethargy of the silkworm merchant and yet one cannot escape the spell of his story. It describes a love as delicate as silk, which is barely perceptible and yet runs through every fibre of his being. There was a silk robe that he once brought back from Japan for his wife, and *«when you touched it, it was as if you held nothing in your hands.»* His love for the Japanese girl also consists of a seductive hint of nothing; it is a beautiful illusion, a sweet and painful craving. The rhythm of

the novel seduces us, bewitches and confuses us, just like the Sirens of Odysseus: it is impossible to escape from its sad and delicate cadence.

«*What is the end of the world like?*», someone asks Hervé after one of his trips.

«*Invisible*», he replies.

«*In Italian one calls this type of story «un sortilegio di amore»*», Antonio explains. What sounds like a magic spell can also be translated as one: the magic of love, which cannot be rationally explained. It is not surprising that such story-telling skills inspire young people to learn the magic of writing and try their hand at it themselves. Later in my study I consulted the dictionary: the word can also mean witchcraft. Does this mean their love is cursed? One can read the novel like this or like that, and it is always new, always different. The anti-hero Hervé Joncour does not develop, but the reader does – perhaps this was one of the author's objectives?

At the Scuola Holden Antonio gets to know the craft of writing in different genres, experiments with form and content, develops visions, gets feedback from like-minded people. He gains insights into the colourful world of journalism and the film industry, and makes a name for himself as a scriptwriter. In the summer of 2023 the Sicilian writer graduates from the Scuola Holden with a master's in creative writing and starts working for various magazines as a freelancer. After all, the rent has to be paid and food needs to be put on the table. Things go well and his articles are popular, sometimes even appearing in Vogue. However, his dream, as delicate as silk, is still to write a novel.

One of his mentors at the Scuola Holden, the actor and visual artist

Alec von Barga took the young and talented novelist under his wing. He advised him to devote himself entirely to the art of the novel and distance himself from the distractions of daily life. He told him of an artists' residence in Shanghai, where he was in charge of the mentoring programme. This would be the best possible environment for writing a novel.

Antonio liked the idea. Hervé had to travel to Japan in order to bring a touch of passion and magic to his life. Why shouldn't he travel to the Far East, too? He applied for a scholarship at the renowned artists' residence at the Swatch Art Peace Hotel. The selection jury liked the young writer's project, and since August 2024 he has been working on his debut novel here on The Bund. I had the same luck, and that is how we met.

«*I like it here: I can immerse myself completely and utterly in the writing process*», Antonio explains. The young man's work ethic is impressive. Every day from 10am to 5pm he sits in the library of the artists' residence, engrossed in *Cosa Resta* (in English: What remains), the working title of his fictitious family history. He is convinced that a high level of discipline is an important quality in a writer.

«*Have you ever actually told Alessandro Baricco that you wanted to become a writer because of his novel?*» I ask him at the end of our discussion.

«*No, I am much too shy for that*», he concedes. But he will tell him one day, preferably as soon as his novel is published. He deserves it; after all, reading is how one arrives at writing. The German writer Martin Walser apparently once said that in fact reading and writing are two words for the same activity. Ingo Schulze, the current President of the

Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung, the German equivalent of the Scuola Holden, agrees with him and thinks that writing is like reading and reading is like writing, especially «*when you have the book open before you like a score and [...] you have a whole orchestra at your disposal.*» There is that comparison between music and rhythm again. Antonio and *Seta* are the best example of this artistic analogy.

For reading and writing – and in my case, interviewing people and tracking down book stories – the Swatch Art Peace Hotel is the best place in the world. Creating art, in your own private atelier, within the beating heart of a metropolis of millions, is a real privilege. The place is a safe harbour, an inspiring and colourful bubble, a well-organised retreat for creatives of all disciplines. It is a happy coincidence that my fellow resident Antonio had such an inspiring story to tell me, and it underlines one of the guiding principles of this institution: artists from all disciplines and all parts of the world should inspire each other, support each other, and if possible, create projects together. Harmony in Diversity, to cite the motto of the Chinese Pavilion at this year's Biennale in Venice – that is the order of the day. This story proves it beautifully.

*Written by* **Antonio Mulone**

Gli occhi vivono lo sforzo costante di immaginare l'intimo come universale.

Occhi che sono punti di vista sul mondo, e sulla sua rappresentazione.

Le storie combattono il terrore di restare soli, chiusi dentro accadimenti che sentiamo solo noi.

Due mani proteggono il confine sottilissimo tra esterno e interno, raccontano le mie storie: domande che altri si sono posti.

*Written by* **Antonio Mulone**

English Translation

The eyes reflect the constant struggle of imaging the intimate as universal.

Eyes that gaze on the world, and on its representation.

Stories fight against the terror of being alone, trapped inside our own personal circumstances.

Two hands protect the insubstantial divide between outside and inside, telling my stories: questions others have asked themselves.



This artwork is a collaboration of Italian writer Antonio Mulone (who shared his story), Austrian writer Roland Schwarz (who wrote it down) and Swiss artist Philip Earnhart (who visualized it in a painting). The three artists lived and worked together at the Swatch Art Peace Hotel in the fall of 2024. The true spirit of this unique artist residency comes alive in this artistic «trace».

They can be reached at [antonio.mulone98@gmail.com](mailto:antonio.mulone98@gmail.com) (Antonio), [findemobydick@gmail.com](mailto:findemobydick@gmail.com) (Roland), [inspire@philipearnhart.ch](mailto:inspire@philipearnhart.ch) (Philip).