

From Photographs to Fiction

The Norway of Willem Frederik Hermans

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In 1960 and 1961, Dutch writer Willem Frederik Hermans made two trips to Scandinavia: the first, to Norrbotten in northern Sweden to attend an earth sciences symposium and the 19th International Geographical Congress; the second, to Finnmark in northern Norway, for a field study with three Norwegian colleagues, one of whom he had met the previous year at the conference in Sweden (Kroonenberg 2023: 165). These trips were a great source of inspiration for Hermans, both scientifically and creatively. He meticulously documented his time in Norway, producing a substantial photographic archive comprising 364 color slides, and several years after his stay, in 1966, he published *Nooit meer slapen* (Hermans 2010: 409-713)¹ [Beyond Sleep] (2020),² one of his most celebrated novels, set in Norway.

Willem Frederik Hermans (1921-1995) was among *De Grote Drie*, or the Big Three Dutch writers of the postwar period. His novel, *De donkere kamer van Damokles* [The Darkroom of Damocles], considered among the most important post-World War II novels in European literature, was both a critical and commercial success when it was first published in 1958, and it was subsequently translated into English, French, Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, and Finnish in the early 1960s (Kegel et al. 2017: 269). However, despite this first wave of translations, Hermans's work has only garnered widespread international recognition posthumously, following new translations of some of his most celebrated works, including new English and French translations of *De donkere kamer van Damokles* (in 2005 and 2006, respectively), *Nooit meer slapen* [Beyond Sleep] (2006 and 2009), *Het behouden huis* [An Untouched House] (2018 and 2023), and the 2021 English translation of *Herinneringen van een engelbewaarder* [A Guardian Angel Recalls].

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¹ All original Dutch text is cited from this edition.

² All English translations of the text are cited from this edition.

Though not recognized as a professional photographer, Hermans realized an impressive body of photographic work. His photographs have been the subject of several exhibits, both during his lifetime and posthumously. In 1960, Hermans's work was exhibited for the first time at La Cave Internationale in Amsterdam. In 1986, to celebrate the publication of his photo book *Koningin Eenoog* [Queen One-eye] (Hermans 2019: 211-369), the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam exhibited a selection of images from the book, and in 1991, the *Literatuurmuseum* [Museum of Literature] held an exhibit on Hermans that included some of his photos. In addition to the Literatuurmuseum's current and on-going online exhibit of Hermans's photographs from his trip to Norway in 1961, his photographic work was also the subject of the exhibit *Vrij belangrijke foto's* [Rather Important Photos] at the *Fotomuseum* [Photo Museum] in The Hague from August 2022 to January 2023. In addition to Hermans's commitment to the arts, he was formally trained as a scientist. He completed his doctorate in natural sciences at the University of Amsterdam in 1955 and worked as a lecturer in physical geography at the University of Groningen until 1973.

Although the Dutch author's trips to Scandinavia were linked to his scientific career, they were also very productive for him from an artistic point of view. The photographs attest firsthand to what Hermans saw, and in *Beyond Sleep*, he builds on his own experiences in Norway to recount the fictional misadventures of Alfred Issendorf, a Dutch PhD student in geology who travels to Finnmark for a field study. Photographically, Hermans purveys an image of Norway's natural beauty: his meticulously catalogued photo collection predominately features landscape photos. It is essential to specify that many of these photographs were taken with scientific ends in mind; the photographs served as field documentation for bodies of water, rock formations, and vegetation.³ Textually, however, Hermans paints a far more sinister picture of the country in *Beyond Sleep*. Lurking beneath the picturesque views, Alfred discovers a country that is fundamentally inhospitable. The university professors on whom Alfred must rely for aerial photographs seem incompetent and unwilling to help, and the Norwegian weather and terrain prove equally hostile. Alfred even loses his travel mate Arne, who tragically falls to his death.

This article analyzes two distinct representations of Norway: the photographic and the textual. Its primary objective is to examine and elucidate how each medium—photography and fiction—functions in shaping and conveying the representations presented by Hermans.

³ For an in-depth examination of how the geological formations Hermans saw on his trips to Scandinavia inspired the scientific and technical aspects of his novel, see the chapter "Nooit meer slapen" in Kroonenberg 2023: 165-229.

At the Crossroads between Image and Text: The Literatuurmuseum Exhibit

Since 2016 (Moll 2016), the Literatuurmuseum in The Hague has held an online exhibit entitled *Willem Frederik Hermans: Expeditie Nooit meer slapen* [Willem Frederik Hermans: Expedition *Beyond Sleep*],⁴ which is situated at the crossroads between Hermans's photographs and the novel. For purposes of the exhibit, Hermans scholars Peter Kegel, Nadine Van Maanen, and Bram Oostveen identified specific passages from *Beyond Sleep* that correspond with photographs taken during the author's trip to Norway. Although the exhibit does not provide a comprehensive scholarly examination of such correspondences, it brings to light the direct relationship between Hermans's photographic practice and the descriptive imagery in his fiction. It is worth noting, however, that while Hermans's own experiences inspired certain aspects of his novel, he did not consult his photographs while writing: Peter Kegel contends that the author's writing process was far more intuitive, and Hermans drew on memories and mental images instead of trying to textually recreate his photographs.⁵



Fig. 1: Willem Frederik Hermans, "925 (37) Vaddasgaissa," 1961, color photograph. ©Erven Willem Frederik Hermans.

For example, the image entitled "925 (37) Vaddasgaissa," which depicts the eponymous mountain with a lake and low vegetation in the foreground, is

⁴ Willem Frederik Hermans: *Expeditie Nooit meer slapen*, online exhibit, Literatuurmuseum, The Hague, accessed 15 September 2023, <https://literatuurmuseum.nl/nl/ontdek-en-beleef/literatuurlab/online-exposities/hermans/nooit-meer-slapen>.

⁵ Kegel Peter (researcher and project manager, Huygens Instituut), in discussion with the author, Amsterdam, 4 October 2023.

paired with the first lines of Chapter 20: “Black shadows of the Vaddasgaissa streak southwards across the plain. Beyond the shadows the ground is pale green, grass green, bottle green, British racing green, brown. Small lakes and winding streams reflect the blues and pinks of the sky in shades of anodised aluminum”⁶ (Hermans 2020: 124).

In another photo-text pairing, the photograph “1147 Kerk in Trondheim” [Church in Trondheim] depicts the titular religious building, which corresponds precisely to the description provided in the accompanying text from Chapter 9: “In the taxi I keep an eye out for the sights of Trondheim. I see a large cathedral with copper-green roofing” (Hermans 2020: 45).⁷ Additionally, the image “926 (1) Skålwald met meerforel” [Skålwald with Lake Trout], which shows Hermans’s colleague brandishing a fish, is paired with an appropriate excerpt from Chapter 26:



Fig. 2: Willem Frederik Hermans, “1147 Kerk in Trondheim,” 1961, color photograph. ©Erven Willem Frederik Hermans.

Qvigstad puts his arm out sideways, holding one end of a branch between forefinger and thumb. The branch hangs perpendicular to the ground, with a large fish impaled by the gills on a snapped-off side shoot.

“See this? Red belly!”

“Freeze!”

I raise my camera to my right eye.

“Could you lift it up a bit?”

The fish, in sharp focus, fills the centre of the frame along with the branch and the hand holding it.⁸ (Hermans 2020: 151)

The exhibit traces the convergences between the photographs and the novel, or in other words, the texts and photos are paired because they both convey the same vision of Norway.⁹ However, this article is less concerned with the

⁶ “Zwarte schaduw stroomt van de Vaddasgaissa over de vlakke naast de zuidelijke helling. Voorbij de schaduw is de grond lichtgroen, grasgroen, donkergroen, british racing green, bruin. Meertjes en kronkelende waterlopen weerspiegelen blauw en roze van de hemel in de kleuren van geanodiseerd aluminum.” Hermans 2010: 531.

⁷ “In de taxi probeer ik zoveel mogelijk van Trondheim te zien. Ik zie een grote kathedraal met daken van groen koper.” Hermans 2010: 455.

⁸ “Qvigstad houdt met gestrekte arm een tak tussen duim en wijsvinger. De tak hangt als een schietlood naar beneden. Een afgeknot zijtakje, onder aan de tak, is door de kieuw van een grotet dode vis gestoken. / – Zie je wel! Rooie buik! / – Blijf even staan! / Ik breng mijn fototoestel aan mijn rechteroog. / – Houd hem iets hoger! / Scherp, in het midden van de foto de vis, de tak en de hand die de tak vasthoudt.” Hermans 2010: 556.

⁹ Three of Hermans’s photos taken in Scandinavia were paired with excerpts of text from *Nooit meer slapen* in an interview published on 2 March 1991 in *Vrij Nederland*. Much like the current “Expeditie *Nooit meer slapen*” exhibit, these photo-text pairings reflect the near-literal similarities between image and text. The photos printed in the

convergence between the photographic and textual representations than with how the two media articulate different—even opposing—portrayals of the country.

One Headache After Another: Alfred's Academic Difficulties in Norway

Unique to Hermans's textual representation of Norway in *Beyond Sleep* is the country's portrayal as a fundamentally harsh and unwelcoming place. Indeed, the numerous and unending difficulties that Alfred encounters become the hallmark of the country's literary representation. This representation may be divided into two distinct, yet interrelated parts: the university setting and the northern Norwegian wilderness. The former is the precursor to Hermans's 1975 novel, *Onder professoren* [Among Professors] (Hermans 2013), in which he paints a scathing picture of academia at the University of Groningen. *Onder professoren* details the experiences of the fictional Rufus Dingelam, a chemistry professor at the University of Groningen who wins the Nobel Prize for research done decades earlier. Hermans biographer Willem Otterspeer asserts that the prize ceremony and its immediate aftermath constitute the novel's focal point, and the rest of the relatively lengthy novel (~500 pages) is concerned with "context, satire of the times, the image of university entangled in ideological confusion, fashionable professors, dogmatic students, a world of advertising and claptrap in which small senselessness drowns out the big."¹⁰ Despite Hermans's claims to the contrary,¹¹ *Onder professoren* is a *roman à clef* based on his own strained relationships with colleagues and the administration during his time as a lecturer in Groningen. As a result of these professional conflicts, Hermans left the university in 1973 before subsequently moving to France, and *Onder professoren* was the first book he published after leaving the Netherlands. As such, Hermans's satirical representation of the Norwegian university milieu in *Beyond Sleep* can be seen as the forerunner for the total discontent and disillusionment with academia that he expresses in *Onder professoren*.

article were likely taken from the Literatuurmuseum's 1991 exhibit on Hermans and the corresponding text added by editorial staff. The photos and corresponding text were republished in 2022 in the twenty-third volume of *Volledige Werken*. See Koelewijn 1991; Hermans 2022: 286-288.

¹⁰ My translation of the original text: "De rest is context, tijdsatire, het beeld van een in ideologische verwarring verstrikte Universiteit, modieuze professoren, dogmatische studenten, een wereld van reclama en prietpraat, waarin de kleine zinloosheid de grote overstemt" (Otterspeer 2015: 670).

¹¹ In the novel's afterword, Hermans expressly warns against reading *Onder professoren* as a *roman à clef*, despite the numerous similarities between the novel and the very real circumstances that led to Hermans's departure from the university.

Beyond Sleep opens with Alfred's arrival at the University of Oslo, where his doctoral supervisor, Sibbelee, has organized a meeting for him with Professor Nummedal, a Norwegian colleague who will supposedly provide Alfred with the aerial photographs necessary for his fieldwork in Finnmark. The novel is narrated by Alfred, who, from the novel's opening line, designates the university personnel he encounters both inadequate and incapable: "The porter is disabled" (Hermans 2020: 1).¹² After a brief, albeit frustrating encounter with the porter, Alfred is finally directed to Nummedal's office, though he is unable to shake his annoyance:

The cheek! Treating me as if I were just anyone, someone who'd wandered in off the street without having an appointment.

But I suppress my rage. I'm prepared to have pity on him, like his employer, who evidently sees fit to keep him on despite his inability to perform simple tasks, such as receiving visitors without treating them as though they can drop dead for all he cares. (Hermans 2020: 2)¹³

From the reader's perspective, it appears that Alfred has only been minorly inconvenienced in his interaction with the disabled porter: the man admits that he does not know whether Nummedal is in his study, so Alfred must explain that he confirmed the appointment with Nummedal's secretary the day before. Alfred readies a letter from Nummedal as proof of their organized meeting, though the blind porter sends Alfred to Nummedal's office without first consulting the letter. The disparity between the reader's interpretation of the encounter and Alfred's seemingly disproportionate response to the men's interaction foregrounds one of the novel's central themes: the absence of one "absolute" reality and the co-existence of several different—though equally valid—versions of reality. Narrated in the first-person, the novel recounts Alfred's experiences through *his* eyes, conveying *his* attitudes and judgments, though his worldview is later challenged at the end of the novel.¹⁴ In this way, one could argue that the university staff is not necessarily inept—that is simply how *Alfred* perceives them. Moreover, the consistent use of the present tense lends the narrative the quality of a direct report; the way that Alfred relays his impressions is reminiscent of observations recorded in a log book. The novel is

¹² "De portier is een invalide" (Hermans 2020: 411).

¹³ "Hij deed verdomme of ik de eerste de beste was, op goed geluk hier naar binnen gelopen, zonder een afspraak te hebben gemaakt. Maar ik bedwing mijn woede. Ik ben bereid evenveel medelijden met hem te hebben als zijn chef klaarblijkelijk heeft, die hem immers handhaaft hoewel hij tot zulk eenvoudig werk als het ontvangen van een bezoeker niet behoorlijk in straat is. Als hij tegenover iedereen die hier zijn moet zich gedraagt of je, wat hem betreft, kan doodvallen." Hermans 2010: 412.

¹⁴ At the end of the novel, when Alfred asks a young Norwegian girl to translate his late traveling companion's journal, he realizes that Arne's vision of their time together in Finnmark was very different from his own.

narrated by a protagonist who strives—and ultimately fails—to make sense of the unfamiliar environment around him.

However, this initial hypothesis—that the critical view of the university is merely a matter of ontology and narration—is quickly dispelled, as Alfred provides ample reason for the reader to believe that the university personnel are indeed as incompetent as he portrays them. When Alfred justifies his presence to Nummedal by explaining that his meeting was scheduled with the professor's secretary, Nummedal appears somewhat indifferent, and his reply suggests that his secretary perhaps may not be fulfilling her job requirements:

[Nummedal's] English is very hard to distinguish from Norwegian, which I don't speak, and his voice is as ancient as only a voice can be that has said all there is to say:

"I do not recall my secretary saying this to me, but perhaps it was her intention. Where does you come from?" (Hermans 2020: 3)¹⁵

Scheduling conflicts and similar oversights are common in large institutions; thus, Nummedal's comment is not a direct indictment of the university's ability to serve its students and faculty, but rather a reminder that university administration does not always execute its daily functions flawlessly.

Beyond these minor signs that the university functions less like a well-oiled machine and more like one succumbing to the onset of rust, the university's most apparent shortcomings are Nummedal's disregard for Alfred's research and the professor's inability to provide him with aerial photographs. Alfred believes that his supervisor has informed Nummedal of the situation and that Nummedal will provide the aerial photographs as requested. However, when Alfred raises the matter, Nummedal appears decidedly uninformed about the situation: "Aerial photographs? What do you mean, aerial photos? Of course we have aerial photos here. But I do not know whether anyone is using them at present. There are so many aerial photos" (Hermans 2020: 6).¹⁶ Determined to obtain the photographs, Alfred agrees to spend the afternoon with Nummedal exploring Oslo, hoping to find another opportunity to address the issue. When Alfred works up the nerve to ask him once more, he is met with unfavorable news:

"I don't have any aerial photographs for you. Aerial photographs! Of course we have aerial photographs at my institute! But aerial photographs for you to use in the field—how could you think...? We don't go out and take those photographs ourselves, you know."

¹⁵ "Zijn Engels is alleen met grote moeite te onderscheiden van Noors dat ik niet versta en zijn stem is zo oud als alleen een stem kan zijn die alles al es heeft gezegd: – Ik herineer mij niet dat mijn secretaresse met mij over u gesproken heeft, maar misschien is zij van plan geweest dat te doen. Where does you come from?" Hermans 2010: 413.

¹⁶ "Luchtfoto's? Hoezo? Luchtfoto's? Natuurlijk hebben wij hier luchtfoto's. Maar ik weet niet of iemand ze op het ogenblik in gebruik heeft. Er zijn zoveel luchtfoto's." Hermans 2010: 416.

“But Professor Sibbelee said...”

“What does Professor Sibbelee know! How can Professor Sibbelee make promises about my aerial photographs? If you want aerial photographs, you must go and get them from the Geological Survey in Trondheim, which is where they are kept. [...] Direktør Hvalbiff! [...] Hvalbiff is your man. I will telephone at once and tell him to expect you.” (Hermans 2020: 27)¹⁷

Much to Alfred’s disappointment, he learns that he must now make an additional stop on his way north to Finnmark to pick up the aerial photographs. While mentally composing a postcard to his supervisor, Alfred attributes Nummedal’s lack of cooperation to lingering tensions between Nummedal and Sibbelee: “Apparently you took issue with him in your youth, for which it seems he is still seeking revenge” (Hermans 2020: 28).¹⁸ During their day together, Nummedal laughed as he recalled to Alfred that, some thirty years earlier at a conference, the much younger Sibbelee had vehemently disagreed with his arguments. Alfred therefore believes that Nummedal is deliberately undermining his research in retaliation for a disagreement between Nummedal and Sibbelee that occurred decades earlier.

Alfred visits the Geological Survey in Trondheim, but to his dismay, the man who welcomes him, Direktør Oftedal, knows nothing about a phone call from Oslo. Oftedal informs Alfred that Direktør Hvalbiff is unavailable, and that because the Survey is in the process of moving, the aerial photographs have not yet arrived. Oftedal adds, as if by way of consolation: “Direktør Hvalbiff and Nummedal do not see eye to eye. It is probably just as well Hvalbiff is not here to receive you. Because if he were here I doubt he would have given you the photographs you want, even if he knew where to find them” (Hermans 2020: 52).¹⁹ Alfred is forced to leave Trondheim empty-handed, resigned to carry out his fieldwork without the aerial photographs. When he recounts to his Norwegian travel companions his failure to obtain the surveys in Trondheim, Alfred is informed that “Hvalbiff” is not a Norwegian name. In fact, “Hvalbiff” does not appear to be a name at all, for Arne reveals that the word signifies

¹⁷ “Ik heb geen luchtfoto’s voor u. Luchtfoto’s! Natuurlijk hebben wij luchtfoto’s op mijn instituut! Maar luchtfoto’s voor u, om in het veld te gebruiken, wat denkt u! Die luchtfoto’s maken wij immers niet zelf. / – Maar professor Sibbelee... / – Wat kan professor Sibbelee ervan af weten! Hoe kan professor Sibbelee iets beloven over mijn luchtfoto’s? Als u luchtfoto’s hebben wil, moet u ze halen op de plaats waar ze zijn. En dat is bij de Geologische Dienst in Trondheim. [...] Direktør Hvalbiff! [...] Hvalbiff is de man die u moet hebben. Ik zal hem onmiddellijk opbellen, dan is hij voorbereid op uw komst.” Hermans 2010: 437.

¹⁸ “In uw jeugd schijnt u hem eens te hebben tegengesproken, en daarover zou hij, dunkt me, nog altijd wraak willen nemen.” Hermans 2010: 438.

¹⁹ “Direktør Hvalbiff kan Nummedal niet geschilderd zien. Eigenlijk mag ik u wel feliciteren dat Hvalbiff er niet is. Anders zou u die foto’s die u hebben moet in geen geval krijgen, zelfs al waren ze hier.” Hermans 2010: 462.

“whale meat” (Hermans 2020: 197; 2010: 601). Alfred connects the dots and realizes that the supposed “Direktør Hvalbiff” and Direktør Oftedal are one and the same, but that Nummedal failed to specify that “Hvalbiff” was simply a scornful sobriquet for the man. In Hermans’s Norway, the university milieu is marked by petty rivalries among colleagues that undermine the work of junior researchers, who often become the victims of childish conflicts between their superiors. While Hermans’s novel offers a damning portrait of academia, his photographs do not reflect this critical perspective. In fact, his photographs are marked by the complete absence of the university setting.

Light, Night, and the Sun That [Almost] Never Sets

One particular photo-text pairing in the Literatuurmuseum exhibit allows for further exploration of how Hermans’s photographic and textual representations of Norway respectively function. The photograph “1107 (33) Middernachtshemel” [Midnight Sky], which depicts a pink-tinged cloud formation, is associated with text from Chapter 35: “A rippling, fluffy blanket of pink is pulled across the sky by invisible hands. It doesn’t keep me warm, in fact I feel very chilly, so I get up again” (Hermans 2020: 240).²⁰ This pairing raises questions about light, an important motif in the novel and also a foremost consideration in the field of photography. Light is also an effective starting point for analysis because it clearly articulates the respective functions of photographic and textual representation.



Fig. 3: Willem Frederik Hermans, “1107 (33) Middernachtshemel,” 1961, color photograph. ©Erven Willem Frederik Hermans.

²⁰ “Een golvende wollen deken van roze wordt door onzichtbare handen over de hemel getrokken. Ik word er niet door toegedekt, eerder krijg ik het nog kouder en daarom sta ik maar weer op.” Hermans 2010: 643.

In *Beyond Sleep*, Hermans emphasizes the long daylight hours in Norway. The novel's narrator, Alfred, repeatedly comments on and often complains about the light conditions. For example, in Chapter 7, Alfred laments: "I can't get to sleep. At this extreme northern latitude the sun doesn't go down far enough. The windows are blacked out with curtains, but it's impossible to forget the daylight outside" (Hermans 2020: 33).²¹ In Chapter 11, he remarks: "Here in Tromsø you hardly notice when it's evening. At this time of year the light never fades completely. This is the empire on which the sun never sets" (Hermans 2020: 62).²² Several chapters later, Alfred again observes the seemingly endless daylight hours:

[...] the sun is low but blazing in full force. At home, when the sun shines like this at the end of a summer's day, we know dusk will soon fall. As it is, it's going on for midnight, and this is as dark as it will get. (Hermans 2020: 91)²³

The novel's title, *Beyond Sleep*, or "Never Sleep Again," to employ the literal translation of the Dutch title, *Nooit meer slapen*, is in part a reference to the Norwegian summer sun and thereby Alfred's inability to sleep. The emphasis on ubiquitous daylight is only felt, however, in the novel. In his photographic archive, the majority of the images have understandably been taken during the day, when there is sun: having proper lighting conditions is a pre-requisite for any photographic attempt, so this is far from unusual. Among the 364 photos, there are relatively few that appear to have been taken at night, or in low light conditions. However, without looking at the pictures' captions, there is no indication of whether the photographs were taken in the morning, afternoon, or, given the long daylight hours, at night.

With regard to "1107 (33) Middernachtshemel," the image can only be identified as a testament to the long Norwegian daylight hours because of its caption, which clearly designates the time of day the photograph was taken: "*middernacht*" [midnight]. Had Hermans not meticulously labeled his photographic archive, the viewer could have easily imagined that this image was simply a photograph of a storm brewing, of a pretty cloud formation, or the beginnings of a sunset. There are two other photos in the collection that portray the midnight sun: "910 (20) Fjellangs in middernachtszon" [Fjellangs in Midnight Sun], which depicts a couple squatting in a field, bathed in golden light, and "912 (24) Middernachtszon Alta A" [Midnight Sun Alta A], which

²¹ "Ik kan niet slapen. Zo ver in het Noorden als hier, gaat om deze tijd van het jaar de zon niet ver genoeg onder. Er zijn zwarte gordijnen voor de ramen, maar je weet toch dat het buiten geen nacht is." Hermans 2010: 443.

²² "Aan het licht kun je nauwelijks zien dat het avond wordt in Tromsø. Hier wordt het om deze tijd van het jaar helemaal geen nacht meer. Dit is het rijk waar de zon nooit ondergaat." Hermans 2010: 471.

²³ "[...] de zon staat laag, maar schijnt op volle kracht. 't Wordt avond, zeggen ze bij ons, als de zon na een warme zomerdag op die manier schijnt. Maar hier is het al bijna nacht en nachtelijker kan het niet meer worden." Hermans 2010: 499.

depicts a golden sun sitting low on the horizon. Likewise, there is no specific indication in these photographs that they were taken at night, and one could reasonably surmise that they were captured at another time of day.

Fig. 4: Willem Frederik Hermans, "910 (20) Fjellangs in middernachtszon," 1961, color photograph. ©Erven Willem Frederik Hermans



Fig. 5: Willem Frederik Hermans, "912 (24) Middernachtszon Alta A," 1961, color photograph. ©Erven Willem Frederik Hermans



Fig. 6: Willem Frederik Hermans, "972 (8) Zon," 1961, color photograph. © Erven Willem Frederik Hermans



Just like the photograph of the pink clouds, it is impossible to temporally situate these photos without their captions. Consider, for example, the photograph “972 (8) Zon,” which is simply titled “Sun.” Here, there is nothing to distinguish the previous photo (“Middernachtszon Alta A”), which is clearly identified as *midnight* sun, from this one (“Zon”). Perhaps the light in “Zon” appears a little less “golden” than in “Middernachtszon Alta A,” though this impression may be due to the photographic equipment or development techniques used. Ultimately, it is the *text* that purveys this characterization of Norway as the empire where the sun never sets. The photograph alone cannot provide the viewer with a complete interpretation of reality; the image must be contextualized for the viewer to derive meaning from it.

The photo alone does not attest to the long daylight hours that haunt Alfred—and likely haunted Hermans during his own trip. In this sense, the photograph is an insufficient means of representation insofar as it depends on external context or accompanying text. Captions aside, unless one recognizes the landscapes or cultural markers depicted in Hermans’s photos, the only way to know that these are photos of Norway is because they have been labeled as such. The photograph is thus limited in its ability to convey information; rather, the caption and the image’s inclusion in the photo collection provide the necessary context to give it meaning.

Seeing and Writing the Natural Beauty of Norway

Hermans’s photographs predominately attest to the country’s natural beauty and to the Norwegian landscapes. His photographs depict picturesque fjords, sinewy rivers, ink blue lakes, valleys, sprawling vegetation, and cloud formations reflected in crystalline waters. His textual representations of Norway’s beauty, however, are somewhat less explicit. For example, in Chapter 5, while walking around with Nummedal, Alfred observes: “The fjord is deep blue, while the blue of the sky so far north seems almost too timid to call itself blue. Craggy mountains, toy-town houses. A world-famous panorama” (Hermans 2020: 25).²⁴ Here, Hermans relies on his reader’s knowledge of the fabled Norwegian landscapes. Instead of an elaborate description, he provides an abbreviated one: by concluding with the phrase, “A world-famous panorama,” Hermans assumes his reader is already familiar with the Norwegian terrain, as his textual portrayal of this beauty relies heavily on the reader’s ability to mentally visualize such landscapes.

²⁴ “Het forse blauwe water van de fjord en het timide blauw van de hemel die er, zo ver naar het noorden, bijna geen aanspraak meer op schijnt te durven maken blauw te zijn. De bonkige bergen, de speelgoedhuizen van de stad. Wereldberoemd panorama.” Hermans 2010: 435.

From a purely personal and subjective point of view, Norway's beauty is best appreciated through Hermans's photographic work. There is an undeniable "wow" factor in the visual images that the text does not convey. To be sure, Alfred's narrative voice is straightforward and direct, avoiding lengthy or elaborate descriptions; his portrayals of the Norwegian topography are no exception. As far as reader and viewer experiences are concerned, the visual image proves more effective than text in conveying the beauty of the Norwegian landscape, particularly for readers who have not experienced it firsthand. As the well-known adage goes, "A picture is worth a thousand words."

Despite the text's relative "shortcomings"—or rather, Hermans's deliberate choice to employ abbreviated rather than exhaustive descriptions, which cannot rival the visual immediacy of the photographs—the narrative nonetheless conveys an equally laudatory image of Norway's natural beauty. Nevertheless, alongside such discussions of its beauty, Hermans's textual representation paints a much more disquieting picture of the country. His novel emphasizes the hostile nature of both the academic community and the terrain.²⁵ The unforgiving nature of the terrain is hardly visible in the photographs, if indeed Hermans's own trek was as treacherous as Alfred's. Additionally, one could argue that short of images explicitly depicting hardship on the trail, the difficulties posed by Finnmark's rugged terrain cannot truly be seen, regardless of one's photography skills or equipment. Images cannot fully replicate the knowledge gained through firsthand experience of the topography, and additional factors, such as questions of scale, must be considered when interpreting photographs. (What appears to be a molehill may actually be a mountain.) Moreover, in *Beyond Sleep*, the trek appears only truly demanding for Alfred and not for his more seasoned colleagues,²⁶ which suggests that his difficulties have less to do with the terrain itself and more to do with his own lack of physical conditioning. There is, however, one particular visual marker of nature's hostility in Hermans's photos that, once contextualized and juxtaposed with the novel, assume greater significance: mosquitoes.

²⁵ For an analysis of how Finnmark's rocky terrain serves as a metaphor for the impossibility of navigating through space and time in *Nooit meer slapen*, see Wennerscheid 2018: 292-298.

²⁶ Certainly, one could argue that Arne's untimely death attests to the trek's technical difficulties, though when Alfred finds Arne's body, he wonders: "How many times have I run up and down the slope where Arne fell to his death?" Hermans 2020: 266 ("Hoeveel keer ben ik de helling waar Arne af gevallen is, op en neer gedraafd?", Hermans 2010: 669). As such, Arne's death would be best classified as an unfortunate accident, especially if Alfred himself succeeded in climbing and descending this stretch of landscape several times without incident.

The Mosquito Question: Texts and Photos of a Norwegian Nuisance

While mosquitoes may not constitute a formal motif, they are a recurring image in the text that highlights the persistent discomfort Alfred faces during his expedition. In *Beyond Sleep*, Alfred mentions mosquitoes on more than a dozen separate occasions, in addition to many other passing remarks about the sheer quantity of insects he encounters. Much like the long daylight hours, mosquitoes are a constant nuisance that plagues Alfred. To cite but a few of his comments, in Chapter 14, Alfred complains: “Mosquitoes keep settling on my face and on the backs of my hands. Even cigarette smoke doesn’t keep them away.”²⁷ (Hermans 2020: 85). In Chapter 17, he describes the volume of mosquitoes and his attempts to overcome the bites’ irritation: “The [window] panes are stippled with thousands of mosquitoes: cobwebby legs, slimy bodies. I stare at them while I scratch one mosquito bite at length, then press a sharp thumbnail into it crosswise. Itching submerged by pain.”²⁸ (Hermans 2020: 103). In Chapter 25, Alfred describes the inescapable buzz of the mosquitoes in his tent:

Mosquitoes and flies raise and lower the pitch of their buzzing in full accord with the Doppler Effect. Oh, you can tell exactly where they are simply by ear. Over the past day I have developed a successful technique of killing them by means of slaps to the head, my hands being guided by sound not sight. The sonar-driven *coup de grâce*. (Hermans 2020: 146)²⁹

As with the prolonged daylight, the pervasive presence of mosquitoes is most acutely conveyed in the text. With regard to the mosquito nuisance, it is equally noteworthy to mention Boudewijn Koole’s 2016 cinematic adaptation of the novel, *Beyond Sleep*, in which sound designer Mark Glynne’s soundscape combines ambient music, sounds from nature, such as that of rushing water, and the recurrent whine of mosquitoes (Boudewijn 2016). In addition to the pronounced auditory dimension of the mosquitoes’ presence, the film also shows Alfred repeatedly swatting them away and cursing, while his Norwegian counterparts remain comparatively unperturbed by the insects.

²⁷ “Muggen vlijen zich voortdurend neer op mijn gezicht en op de rugen van mijn handen. Zelfs aan sigaretterook storen zij zich niet.” Hermans 2010: 493.

²⁸ “Rusteloos duizenden muggen tegen het vuile glas. Op hun poten van spinrag, hun lichaam van snot. Nu bedachtzaam er met scherpe duimnagel een kruis in te drukken. De jeuk bedelven onder pijn.” Hermans 2010: 509-510.

²⁹ “Muggen en vliegen doen de toonhoogten van hun gezoem rijzen en dalen volgens het Dopplereffect. O, je weet het precies als ze vlak bij je oor zijn. Ik heb in de loop van de dag, met veel success, een techniek ontwikkeld ze dood te slaan tegen de zijkant van mijn hoofd, zonder te kijken, alleen op het gehoor. Ik gaf ze de sonargestuurde doodklap.” Hermans 2010: 551.



Fig. 7: Willem Frederik Hermans, "973 (9) Tent met muggen I," 1961, color photograph.
©Erven Willem Frederik Hermans.

Of the 364 photos in the Literatuurmuseum exhibit, only two distinctly depict mosquitoes. Yet, as there is no shortage of textual references to the mosquitoes in *Beyond Sleep*, both of these images are paired with accompanying text. The first photo, "973 (9) Tent met muggen I" [Tent with Mosquitoes I], which depicts the apex of a tent filled with mosquitoes and the shoulder of one of Hermans's travel companions in the foreground, is associated with the following text:

[...]. Arne's tent is shaped like a pyramid propped up in the centre with a broken broom handle wound round with copper wire to join the two pieces together. [...]. The white canvas sides are heavily patched, like Arne's clothing, and are pegged to the ground at the corners only. We have weighed down the edges with stones to keep out the worst of the wind, but there's no way of keeping out the mosquitoes. **So they congregate at the apex of the pyramid, which, since I am on my back, is in my direct line of vision. From there they sally forth to feast on our hands and faces.**³⁰ (my emphasis) (Hermans 2020: 145)

Both photograph and textual description are echoed again several chapters later, when Alfred recounts: "I stare at the apex of the pyramid, the mosquitoes"

³⁰ "[...]. Arne's tent heeft de vorm van een piramide, in het midden omhoog gehouden door een bezemsteel, die al eens een keertje is gebroken, want ongeveer op de helft is er koperdraad omheen gewikkeld. [...]. Het tentdoek is wit van kleur en met allerlei lappen versted, net als Arne's kleren. Het is alleen aan de hoeken vastgestoken met pennen in de grond. Wij hebben er rondom stenen tegenaan gelegd, dat de wind er niet al te hard onderdoor blast, maar tegen de muggen kunnen wij ons op geen enkele manier verdedigen. Ze verzamelen zich in de top van de piramide, waar ik recht tegenaan kijk, als ik op mijn rug lig. Groepsgewijze komen ze naar beneden om zich op onze handen en gezichten te verzadigen." Hermans 2010: 550.

favourite rallying ground” (Hermans 2020: 209).³¹ The second photograph, “921 (33) Muggen” [Mosquitoes], depicts a subject whose shoulders are stippled with mosquitoes and is presented alongside the following text: “My head is wreathed in mosquitoes. They settle on my forehead, my nose, the backs of my hands” (Hermans 2020: 77).³² There is an abundance of references to mosquitoes in the text, though only these two photographs are included in the collection.³³ Of course, the relative absence of mosquitoes in the photographs is likely due to the difficulty of capturing them in a way that accurately reflects reality.

By comparing the photos with the novel, assumptions are being made about how much Hermans drew from his own experiences to write *Beyond Sleep*. In other words, looking to the photographs as evidence of the journey’s difficulty assumes that Hermans’s own experience closely mirrored that of his protagonist, Alfred. This, however, would constitute a separate research question to address with Hermans’s archives, for he maintained a meticulous travel journal and field notes during his time in Scandinavia.

Unlike the photographic depictions of Norway’s natural beauty, the photographs do not do justice to the possible difficulties encountered on the journey, namely, the mosquito problem. In *Beyond Sleep*, there is something almost visceral about Hermans’s textual representations of the mosquitoes that is sorely absent from the photographs, perhaps owing to the sheer volume and variety of mosquito references in the text. Assuming Hermans intended to faithfully depict the pervasive insect problem in his novel, his photographs—mere snapshots in time—fail to capture the full extent of the mosquito nuisance. Although I cannot personally verify the accuracy of Hermans’s descriptions, colleagues who have camped in northern Norway have confirmed both the abundance and the persistent nuisance of the region’s mosquitoes.

³¹ “Ik kijk regelrecht in de punt van de piramide waar de muggen zich verzamelen [...]” Hermans 2010: 612.

³² “Mijn hoofd is door muggen omzwermd. Muggen gaan op mijn voorhoofd zitten, op mijn neus, op de ruggen van mijn handen.” Hermans 2010: 486.

³³ There is a third image in the collection, “1009 (10) Hermans bij Ramnastua” [Hermans by Ramnastua], that does not explicitly portray mosquitoes but may nonetheless indicate their presence. The photo, which was not paired with text for the Literatuurmuseum exhibit, depicts Hermans, his arms crossed in front of his chest. The visible abrasions on Hermans’s arms might be insect bites, though they could just as plausibly be the result of contact with tree bark or underbrush. In the latter scenario, this photo may serve as visual evidence of Finnmark’s unforgiving terrain, a defining element of Alfred’s journey in *Beyond Sleep*.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Hermans's photographic and textual portrayals of Norway are mediated in markedly different ways by each medium. Situated at the intersection of these two forms of representation, the Literatuurmuseum exhibit attempts to "reconcile" them by pairing seemingly complementary photographs and texts. However, *Beyond Sleep* and Hermans's photographs ultimately articulate differing visions of the country, in large part due to each medium's perceived shortcomings. The long daylight hours in Norway are best understood via text, while photographs of the late-setting sun rely on textual explanation or captions to provide necessary context. In the absence of this context, the photograph alone proves an insufficient means of representation. Likewise, text more effectively conveys the magnitude of the mosquito problem. However, it is Hermans's photo collection that communicates a more impressive and complete picture of Norway's landscapes. *Beyond Sleep's* representation of Norway is more nuanced with regard to Alfred's experiences, while Hermans's photographs ultimately capture the *visual*, not the *situational*.

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