

Dalton Trumbo's *Johnny Got His Gun* and the Centenary of the End of the Great War

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ABSTRACT

In November 2018, the centenary of the end of “the war to end all wars” was commemorated all around the world. World War I affected millions of people and had a profound impact on literature and culture. The paper discusses Dalton Trumbo's 1939 pacifist novel *Johnny Got His Gun* and its late 20th century legacy. Although the novel was published long after the war's end, it remains one of the most powerful anti-war statements. Contrary to more famous World War I novels it does not deal with the disillusionment of the post-war generation. The story of a quadruple amputee which takes place entirely in the main protagonist's head is a claustrophobic and nightmarish journey into the mind of a young boy trapped in himself, imprisoned in darkness. The novel frequently fell out of favor during the 20th century but it enjoyed its share of popularity in Czechoslovakia, thanks to Trumbo's communist sympathies.

KEYWORDS

World War I, Dalton Trumbo, *Johnny Got His Gun*, anti-war novel, pacifism, nightmare

On November 11, 1918, as the news of the Armistice spread around Britain, France and other countries, church bells that had fallen silent during the Great War rang out in celebration. On November 11, 2018, the bells across the same countries rang to commemorate the 100 years since the end of the War. Ceremonies were held all around the world. At the Whitehall Cenotaph in London, a two-minute silence was observed, followed by the Nation's Thank You Procession, in which 10,000 members of the public marched past the white marble memorial. The present article is an attempt at an academic commemoration of this important anniversary. For this, I have chosen Dalton Trumbo's *Johnny Got His Gun* (1939), the last World War I novel written before the start of a far more deadly conflict. *Johnny* won the American Booksellers Award in 1940 as “the most original novel of the year.”¹ It was translated into both Czech and Slovak in the 1970s. Since 1989 both the novel and its film adaptation has become known to fans of one of the greatest metal bands ever: Metallica.²

Woodrow Wilson called it “the war to end all wars.” For Dalton Trumbo, it was “the last of the romantic wars.”³ Although the United States was quite late in entering the war, masses of Americans became directly involved, and more than in any previous conflict they wrote about it.⁴

1 Bruce Cook, *Dalton Trumbo* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977), 140.

2 Contrary to other World War I novels, Trumbo's *Johnny Got His Gun* has never enjoyed much popularity among scholars. During the past twenty years, only a handful of articles have been published: Tim Blackmore's “Lazarus Machine: Body Politics in Dalton Trumbo's *Johnny Got His Gun*” (*Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 33, no. 4, 2000) discusses the modern and postmodern treatment of the body in the novel while Tomáš Pospíšil's “As crippled as it gets: Dalton Trumbo's *Johnny Got His Gun* (1939, 1971)” (*Brno Studies in English* 38, no. 1, 2012) offers a contrastive analysis of the novel and its film adaptation. In 2015, an extensive book-length study of Trumbo's life and career named *Dalton Trumbo: Blacklisted Hollywood Radical* was published by the University Press of Kentucky. What the present paper adds to the existing scholarship is the discussion of the novel's literary reception in Czechoslovakia.

3 Dalton Trumbo, “Author's Introduction (1959)” in Dalton Trumbo, *Johnny Got His Gun* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), xv.

4 Wayne Charles Miller, *An Armed America. Its Face in Fiction* (New York: New York University Press, 1970), 99

Students of American literature are generally familiar with the authors of the “Lost Generation,” which represents a number of expatriate American writers. Among these were John Dos Passos and Ernest Hemingway, who served in the Ambulance Corps and whose disillusionment with the values of the old world came through in their work. Many of the war novels published during the 1920s that now form the canon of World War I literature, including *Three Soldiers* (1921) and *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), reflect such disenchantment. In the 1930s, with the Great Depression and the rise of fascism, the feeling intensified that World War I had been a pointless conflict that had created more problems than it had solved.⁵ Much of the war literature of that decade, including Trumbo’s novel, echoes this attitude.

The experience of the American doughboys was, however, quite different from what British, French, Canadian and ANZAC troops had to endure in the preceding four years. The AEF was in combat only for five months, between July and November 1918, and during this period they were largely spared of the mud and chill that had plagued Allied troops for all those years. Furthermore, few American soldiers experienced trench warfare, since in those last months of the war, German resistance had been broken and the Allied armies were advancing rapidly. According to David Lundberg, since fighting came to a swift victory from the American viewpoint, they had little reason to question the meaning of the war or the decisions of their leaders. Most of the American troops remained cheerful and idealistic during their stay in France and generally did not return home cynical or disillusioned. They, in the words of Woodrow Wilson, kept the world safe for democracy and they were proud of that. So, as Lundberg claims, Hemingway’s or Dos Passos’ novels did not accurately reflect American attitudes during or immediately after World War I.⁶

Dalton Trumbo had been too young to volunteer in the war. Born in 1905, he spent his childhood in Grand Junction, Colorado. Bruce Cook, his biographer, writes that Trumbo donated his savings of two dollars to the Red Cross⁷ and that his only war experience was meeting the wounded veterans that were returning from France. At a high school in Colorado, he started writing for the town’s newspaper and his literary career began during the eight years he worked for a bakery in Los Angeles. *Johnny Got His Gun* remains the most famous novel by Trumbo, who is widely known as the screenwriter of some of the most successful films of the 20th century and as a member of the Hollywood Ten who was blacklisted in the late 1940s until 1960.

Trumbo noted that the novel had “a weird political history.”⁸ He started writing *Johnny* in 1938, and in February 1939 the novel was completed. His purpose was simple: he wanted to get his anti-war message out to a world which was inevitably heading toward a new war. This is why Trumbo was anxious to get it published as soon as possible, which is clear from a letter to Elsie McKeogh, his agent: “If the book is any good at all, it is good as an argument against war; and it will be utterly valueless if the country is either in war or in favour of war by the time it is published.”⁹ Unfortunately, Trumbo’s message was overtaken by events in Europe – Germany invaded Poland on September 1, two days before the book was published.

5 Lundberg, David. “The American Literature of War: The Civil War, World War I, and World War II.” *American Quarterly* 36, No. 3 (1984): 383.

6 Lundberg, “Literature of War,” 379.

7 Cook, *Trumbo*, 35.

8 Trumbo, “Author’s Introduction,” xvi.

9 Cook, *Trumbo*, 130.

The reviews were favorable. In the *Saturday Review of Literature*, the reviewer wrote that *Johnny* “is one of the most horrifying books ever written” and that Trumbo’s novel “can never be forgotten by anyone who ever reads it.”¹⁰ However, after Pearl Harbor, pacifist sentiment virtually disappeared from American society, and the novel’s subject matter suddenly seemed inappropriate. Interestingly, the novel was also embraced as a propaganda tool by the most unlikely group – the far-right and American Nazis. These were among the few people in the country at that time who wished for peace. Trumbo was distressed by this rather unexpected twist in the novel’s popularity and eventually agreed with his publishers that it should not be reprinted until the end of the war.¹¹ Here I agree with Tomáš Pospíšil, who claims that it is a major paradox that the author of such a pacifist novel would become complicit in an attempt to limit the circulation of the book.¹²

The novel’s main protagonist is Joe Bonham, a young soldier who has been maimed by a shell explosion, and the novel takes place entirely in his head. Joe is the ultimate product of war: a body without arms, legs, eyes, ears, a mouth or a nose. According to Booth, during World War I the soldiers’ greatest fear was being buried alive in a dugout by a shell.¹³ This is what happened to Joe; he is “the nearest thing to a dead man on Earth,”¹⁴ simultaneously dead and alive, trapped in himself. Trumbo drew inspiration from a newspaper article he read in the early 1930s which told the story of an event that occurred during the visit of the Prince of Wales in Canada in a veteran’s hospital. Reportedly, the Prince came out weeping from a closed room. According to the article, behind the door lay a soldier who had survived a shell that cost him his arms, legs, mouth, eyes, and nose. The only way the Prince could communicate with him was to kiss him on the forehead. Trumbo decided to write a novel from the point of view of such a victim.¹⁵

The name of the novel is a play on the phrase “Johnny get your gun,” which is the first line from a famous early 20th-century patriotic anthem called “Over There” popularized by George M. Cohan. Trumbo incorporates the lines from the song, together with lines from other popular songs of the period, in a scene where Joe Bonham departs his native Shale City for Europe: “His mother and his sisters were there and Kareen was there and Mike was there muttering goddam fools and glaring at everybody and watching Kareen sharply.” “And their lives if necessary that democracy may not perish from the face of the earth.” “It’s a long way to Tiperrary it’s a long way to go.” “Don’t get scared Kareen. It’s all right.” “As that great patriot Patrick Henry said.” “Johnny get your gun get your gun get your gun.”¹⁶ Pieces of Joe’s dialogue with his sweetheart are jumbled with patriotic phrases from orators and songs sung by the public. According to Sanborn, through the use of popular songs and repetitive use of the word “patriot,” Trumbo conveys the sense of pathos of the day and the excitement felt by those young boys who went to the war.¹⁷ Just like Johnny

10 Quoted in Cook, *Trumbo*, 131.

11 Trumbo, “Author’s Introduction,” xvii.

12 Tomáš Pospíšil, “As Crippled As It Gets: Dalton Trumbo’s *Johnny Got His Gun* (1939; 1971),” *Brno Studies in English* 38, no. 1 (2012): 143.

13 Tim Blackmore, “Lazarus Machine: Body Politics in Dalton Trumbo’s *Johnny Got His Gun*,” *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 33, No. 4 (2000): 4.

14 Dalton Trumbo, *Johnny Got His Gun*, (London: Penguin Books, 2009), 122.

15 Cook, *Trumbo*, 125.

16 Trumbo, *Johnny Got His Gun*, 37.

17 Wallis R Sanborn, *The American Novel of War: A Critical Analysis and Classification System*. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Publishers, 2012), 88.

from the song, Joe Bonham would get his gun. He would be sent to the battle and he would end up as a mind trapped in a limbless body.

The novel is divided into two sections. In Book One, "The Dead," Joe awakes and slowly becomes aware of his state. Firstly, he realizes he is deaf and by Chapter 5, he knows that he has lost his arms as well as his legs: "No legs. No more running walking crawling if you have no legs. No more working. Never again to wiggle your toes... He had no arms and no legs. He threw back his head and started to yell from fright. But he only started because he had no mouth to yell with."¹⁸ Each discovery stirs a memory that makes the loss even more painful to him.¹⁹ Throughout the entire novel, Joe's soliloquies alternate with flashbacks about his childhood in Shale City (a fictional place that stands for Grand Junction, Colorado), his family, and work in a Los Angeles bakery. These flashbacks are largely autobiographical.

In Book Two, "The Living," Joe learns to calculate time. After spending five or six years in his limbless state, he can even tell one nurse from another based on vibrations caused by their footsteps. Finally, remembering the Morse Code he learned as a kid, he breaks down the communication barrier by tapping SOS with his head against the pillow. Eventually, the response WHAT DO YOU WANT? is tapped on his forehead. Joe realizes that he could be used as a warning against all wars of the future. He begs to be put on display as a curiosity in a freak show:

People wouldn't learn much about anatomy from him but they would learn all there was to know about war. That would be a great thing to concentrate war in one stump of a body and show it to people so they could see the difference between a war that's in the newspaper headlines and liberty loan drives and a war that is fought out lonesomely in the mud somewhere between a man and a high explosive shell.²⁰

Joe wants to be exhibited at country fairs, and in churches, schools, and parliaments. He suddenly feels that he has a political purpose, he can become "a battlefield messiah."²¹ However, the army's dry response, WHAT YOU ASK IS AGAINST THE REGULATIONS WHO ARE YOU,²² comes as a complete and utter shock. From the army's viewpoint, Joe simply cannot be granted his wish. Tomáš Pospíšil claims that Joe's disfigured body subverts the traditional rhetoric of mobilizing the masses; therefore, it needs to be kept in isolation, hidden from the outside world.²³

The most clearly voiced anti-war arguments are found in Chapter 10, which closes Book One. Using stream of consciousness and non-punctuated sentences, Trumbo questions the value of high-sounding notions like liberty, freedom, democracy, independence, and honor. Are these really worth dying for?

Did anybody ever come back from the dead any single one of the millions who got killed any one of them ever come back and say by god I'm glad I'm dead because death is always better than dishonour? Did they say I'm glad I died to make the world safe for democracy?²⁴

18 Trumbo, *Johnny Got His Gun*, 61.

19 Cook, *Trumbo*, 127.

20 Trumbo, *Johnny Got His Gun*, 232.

21 Tim Blackmore, "Dalton Trumbo" in Graves, Mark A., and Philip K. Jason. *Encyclopedia of American War Literature*. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), 342.

22 Trumbo, *Johnny Got His Gun*, 242–243.

23 Pospíšil, "As Crippled as It Gets," 140.

24 Trumbo, *Johnny Got His Gun*, 119.

He accuses the politicians and promoters of war who use such words for sending young men to fight and calls them “high-talking murdering sonsofbitches who screamed for blood.”²⁵ The concluding paragraphs of the chapter contain a statement that had extreme appeal to all the young men drafted during the Vietnam War:

The most important thing is your life little guys. You're worth nothing dead except for speeches. Don't let them kid you anymore. Pay no attention when they tap you on the shoulder and say come along we've got to fight for liberty or whatever their word is there's always a word.²⁶

Although *Johnny Got His Gun* is a World War I novel, there are only a handful of references to the details of that particular war. No specific battles or locations are mentioned. In this respect, *Johnny Got His Gun* is similar to Stephen Crane's classic, *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895). Joe remembers crowds and patriotic speeches before leaving for Europe but he does not remember how he became crippled. What he recalls is that it happened sometime in September 1918 (when there were only two months of fighting left, which obviously he does not know because of the nature of his wounds that prevents communication until the latter half of the novel). “There was a howl somewhere and he dived into a dugout and things blotted out and he lost time.”²⁷ When he feels that he is being awarded a medal and a man with a moustache kisses him on both cheeks, it makes Joe believe that he must be in a French hospital, since “French generals were the ones who kissed you when they handed out medals.”²⁸

What makes the reader associate the novel with World War I are a few of Joe's flashbacks related to life in the trenches. Here Trumbo rather unexpectedly uses rather grisly trench humor. In the first instance, Joe recalls a little Scotsman from a neighboring British regiment who refuses to fight against a Bavarian regiment on the other side of no man's land because “the Bavarians were commanded by Crown Prince Rupert and that the Crown Prince was the last Stuart heir to the throne of England and the rightful king and that he would be goddamned if he would fight his king just because some Hanoverian pretender told him to.”²⁹ The Scotsman is sent to the rear until the Bavarian regiment is replaced.

The flashback with the Scotsman is immediately followed by another one about the dead body of a German nicknamed Lazarus. Lazarus had ventured across no man's land and was shot to pieces by British soldiers. Then, for days, he remains entangled in the barbed wire until a British colonel visits the trench and orders the body be buried because of the intolerable stench. However, a couple of days later, a German artillery starts pounding the British lines and Lazarus, just like his Biblical namesake, is risen from his grave: “He leaped into the air like in a slow motion picture and landed high and dry on the wire again with his finger pointing toward the Limey regiment exactly like stool pigeon.”³⁰ He remains hanging on the wire, getting even more smelly until the Colonel comes to the trench again and orders Lazarus be reburied, this time “six feet deep” and

25 Trumbo, *Johnny Got His Gun*, 120.

26 Trumbo, *Johnny Got His Gun*, 125.

27 Trumbo, *Johnny Got His Gun*, 150.

28 Trumbo, *Johnny Got His Gun*, 165.

29 Trumbo, *Johnny Got His Gun*, 153.

30 Trumbo, *Johnny Got His Gun*, 165.

with "the full service of the Church of England over the body of our enemy."³¹ The men of the burial squad risk their lives again, and during the ceremony the Corporal reading the service is shot through the backside.

In 1943 Trumbo joined the Communist Party. In 1947 he refused to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee alongside nine other screenwriters. They became known as the Hollywood Ten, all of whom were sent to jail for contempt of Congress, and all subjected to a blacklist which lasted ten years. Trumbo, however, continued writing screenplays on the black market, and he was so good at it that two of his films, *Roman Holiday* (1953) and *The Brave One* (1956), were awarded Academy Awards for best screenplay. At the end of the 1950s, with screenplays for films such as *Spartacus* (1960) and *Exodus* (1960), Trumbo broke the blacklist and finally was allowed to write under his own name.

In the 1970s, *Johnny Got His Gun* reached audiences in Czechoslovakia. In 1976 the book was translated into Slovak (*Johnnymu dali pušku*, transl. Jarmila Srncová), and three years later a Czech translation was published (*Johnny si vzal pušku*, transl. Otakar Lanc). In the Slovak translation, the only information about the author or the novel is to be found on the dust jacket flaps. It claims that Johnny is "one of the most shocking war novels ever written." The author of the book jacket text considers it interesting that the novel "even 30 years after its publication, has kept such a popularity although the author does not flatter readers who are used to consumerist literature spiced by sex, adventure, and cheap thrills."³²

The Czech translation of the novel includes an epilogue written by Otakar Lanc which praises the novel, noting that it is "a crushing accusation of war and a rousing protest against disarming pacifism. It is on par with such works as *Under Fire* by Henry Barbusse, *A Farewell to Arms* by Ernest Hemingway, *All Quiet on the Western Front* by E. M. Remarque, and *The Mother* by Karel Čapek."³³ With regard to Trumbo, Lanc notes that despite the fact he was awarded the "highest American awards for a work of literature" (the American Booksellers Award and Academy Award for Best Screenplay), his name only rarely appears in surveys and encyclopedias of American culture or literature, and therefore it is not surprising that he had never become a well-known writer in Czechoslovakia. Quite interestingly, both the Slovak and Czech versions of the novel claim that before he became a novelist and screenwriter, Trumbo worked as a railroad hand, in a scrapyard, and as a waiter, although there is no mention whatsoever about these jobs in the quite detailed and thoroughly researched biography by Bruce Cook.

The only part of the epilogue which is written in a discourse typical of the period in which it was written is the last paragraph:

Johnny Got His Gun has excited generations of readers with the urgency of its message and its artistic persuasiveness. It is topical in the era of the nuclear threat, and it will remain topical until nations will be subjected to the hardships of imperialistic wars. It unequivocally stands on the side of powers which, for the benefit of mankind's happiness, struggle for peace in the world. What more can a writer ask?³⁴

31 Trumbo, *Johnny Got His Gun*, 157.

32 Dalton Trumbo, *Johnnymu dali pušku* (Bratislava: Pravda, 1976), author's own translation.

33 Otakar Lanc, "Doslov" in Dalton Trumbo, *Johnny si vzal pušku* (Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1979, transl. by Otakar Lanc), 185, present author's own translation.

34 Lanc, "Doslov," 187.

A film adaptation of *Johnny* was contemplated shortly after the end of the war, but the Congressional hearings, as well as Trumbo's imprisonment and blacklisting put all efforts to a halt. Trumbo wrote the screenplay in 1964, and if any time was ripe for the production of the movie it was the beginning of the 1970s. By that time the country had been mired in a futile conflict in Vietnam for at least five years. Again, like at the end of the 1930s, when the world was rushing toward a world war, Trumbo felt that it is his duty to communicate Johnny's anti-war message to the new generation.³⁵ The fact that he adapted his own novel and even became the film's director is highly unusual.³⁶ American reviews were largely negative, and the film failed commercially, but *Johnny Got His Gun* became a sensation in Europe. At the 1971 Cannes Festival, it won the Grand Prix Spécial du Jury and International Critics Award. In creating the film, Trumbo had to tackle a number of problems related to the nature of his work, particularly that of how to translate to the screen a novel which takes place completely in the main protagonist's head and contains almost no action. Trumbo's solution is that the scenes from the hospital are shot in black and white, while the flashbacks, Johnny's memoirs, and fantasies are shot in color. An interesting fact is that Trumbo's film is not the only adaptation of the novel. In 1984 Czechoslovak Television produced a television film named *Johnny si vzal pušku*.

In 1988 Metallica released ...*And Justice for All*, the band's fourth studio album. The final single from that album is a song named "One," which is about a soldier who has lost his arms, legs, sight, hearing, and soul in a landmine blast.³⁷ Thrash metal bands have often employed the topic of war in their songs, and this is how Lars Ulrich describes the idea behind the song:

James was talking to me about the idea of what it would be like if you were in this situation, where you were basically like a sort of living consciousness, like a basket-case kind of situation; where you couldn't reach out and communicate with anyone around you, where you had no arms, no legs, and couldn't obviously see, hear, or speak or anything like that.³⁸

To fuel Hetfield's (who is the band's principal songwriter) imagination, members of the band management recommended Trumbo's novel and film to him.

The song's is over seven minutes long and its structure makes the listeners feel what Joe Bonham feels.³⁹ The intro includes the sounds of machine gun fire and exploding artillery shells that brought Joe to his state. Then the song starts slowly with Hetfield's guitar, which suggests the quiet solace of Joe being alone with himself. Eventually it picks up tempo and culminates in possibly the most famous riff the band has ever created supported by a double bass drum that "provide the soundtrack for the terror Joe must feel, enduring his existence as a nearly disembodied mind."⁴⁰ The video to the song, the first the band had ever released, premiered on MTV in January 1989 and features pieces of dialogue and scenes from Trumbo's film.

Although Dalton Trumbo did not prevent the world from plunging into another terrible conflict after "the war to end all wars," he succeeded in creating a remarkably original work of

35 Cook, *Trumbo*, 300–301.

36 Pospíšil, "As Crippled as It Gets," 144.

37 Metallica, "One," *And Justice For All*, Elektra, 1988.

38 Quoted in Joanna Corwin, "Trapped in Myself: 'One' and the Mind-Body Problem", in Irwin, William. *Metallica and Philosophy: A Crash Course in Brain Surgery*. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 173.

39 Jason T. Eberl, "Living and Dying as One: Suffering and the Ethics of Euthanasia", in Irwin, William. *Metallica and Philosophy: A Crash Course in Brain Surgery*. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 135.

40 Eberl, "Living and Dying as One," 135. The band even bought the rights to the film to avoid paying excessive royalty fees.

fiction. With his depiction of a totally helpless victim of a senseless war, his novel became one of the strongest anti-war statements of the 20th century. And Trumbo's legacy lives on; thanks to the Metallica song, *Johnny Got His Gun* has achieved a cult status. Furthermore, in 2015 a biopic named *Trumbo* was released with Brian Cranston of *Breaking Bad* fame playing the role of the blacklisted screenwriter.

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