

# Odd Man In

## The Legacy of Dalton Trumbo

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The world and Hollywood had revolved full circle in relation to Dalton Trumbo as he stepped onto a podium one March night in 1970. He'd been a brilliant leader in the fight to create a writers guild, back in the 1930s. In the decade from 1934 to '45 he'd made his mark as a screenwriter of exceptional range and verve. From '46 to '60, when Cold War hysteria derailed his career and that of countless others, he proved an energetic survivor on a scale that is to this day inspirational--churning out countless scripts at discount prices under a series of pseudonyms.

When he finally signed his own name to the screenplays of *Spartacus* and *Exodus* in 1960, it was a one-two punch that broke the blacklist. In the '60s the Vietnam War prompted most Americans to question the nation's policies in terms far stronger

than any for which Trumbo and his colleagues had been so unjustly punished. He and those others--such as Ring Lardner Jr., whose *M\*A\*S\*H* screenplay was driving one of the blockbuster hits of 1970, as well as Abraham Polonsky, whose *Tell Them Willie Boy is Here* opened to critical acclaim in 1969--were now viewed as heroes, while the men and women who'd cooperated with Congress back in the '50s by naming names were commencing life sentences in pop culture's doghouse.

When the Writers Guild gave Trumbo its Laurel Award for career achievement that evening, it was a multilayered triumph, and anyone, especially such a colorful survivor, might well have used the occasion to crow. Yet Trumbo elected to say a most extraordinary thing. "The blacklist was a time of evil," he told the crowd. "No one on either side who survived it came through untouched by evil... There was bad faith and good, honesty and dishonesty, courage and cowardice, selflessness and opportunism, wisdom and stupidity, good and bad on both sides... It will do no good to search for villains or heroes or saints or devils because there were none; there were only victims. Some suffered less than others, some grew or were diminished, but in the final tally we were all victims because almost without exception each of us felt compelled to say things he did not want to say, to do things he did not want to do, to deliver and receive wounds he truly did not want to exchange. That is why none of us--right, left, or center--emerged from that long nightmare without sin."

Nobody in the audience had known what Trumbo was going to say, not even his wife, Cleo, and she was the first to object: "You were entirely too generous," she told him, as they drove home that night. Other members of the fabled Hollywood Ten, who like Trumbo had served upwards of a year in prison for their refusals to testify, were disbelieving. "Well, I thought there were villains and heroes," Alvah Bessie responded, "and it seems to me he used to think so, too. There were villains, all right, and if there were heroes, Trumbo was one of them."

The angriest, and most stubborn of the Ten to reply was Albert Maltz, who'd been the writer of *This Gun For Hire* and *Destination Tokyo* before serving six months alongside Edward Dmytryk at Millpoint Prison Camp, West Virginia. "There is currently a thesis," he told Victor Navasky, author of *Naming Names*, "which declares that everyone during the years of the blacklist was equally a victim. This is factual nonsense and represents a bewildering moral position... If an informer in the French underground who sent a friend to the torture chambers of the Gestapo was equally a victim, then there can be no right or wrong in life that I understand. . . [Trumbo] does not speak for me or many others. Let it be noted, however, that his ethic of 'equal victims' has been ecstatically embraced by all who cooperated with the Committee on Un-American Activities."

Trumbo never said that all were "equally" victims, but he was deliberately attempting to place the blame where it belonged--with a government hell-bent on forcing Americans to betray one another. And he was refusing to exaggerate what had been suffered, or achieved, by anyone on any side: "Our primary aim was to avoid becoming informers," he wrote Maltz. (In the wake of the famous speech, the two engaged in a lengthy correspondence, with 40-page thunderbolts shooting back and forth, until Trumbo's health began to fail him in 1973.) "Our conduct," Trumbo continued, "was not quite as bold, noble, intrepid as it would have been had we voluntarily leaped to the defense of the Constitution without regard to the blood we might lose." Trumbo refused to apply the word *heroic* to himself, Maltz, or to anyone else: "If the Ten weren't heroes, what were they? They were, quite simply, 10 men who chose in that particular moment and situation (although not necessarily in all other moments and situations) to behave with honor."



Dalton Trumbo in 1969 (above) and where his genius best triumphed onto the page, in the bathtub.

By way of being true to such honor, Trumbo suggested Maltz show more compassion to those who'd made the opposite choice. "Some 60 of the persons who were commanded to take the test under pain of punishment failed it--i.e., they became informers. There is very little evidence, if any, that they wanted to become informers. There is an abundance of evidence that they did not want to inform; that they did so with great reluctance; that they acted out of fear (not at all unfounded) and under great pressure." He then cataloged these pressures with a detail worthy of a novelist creating a pack of tragic characters. "Whatever their faults," he concluded, "those 60-odd unwilling witnesses were ordinarily decent people put to a test [that] you and I have declared to be immoral, illegal, and impermissible... They were like us, victims of an ordeal that should not be imposed on anybody, and of the Committee [that] imposed it. As for calling them villains, that cannot be done until the history and definition of *villain* is rewritten to conform with what you believe it should mean, even though it doesn't."

Implied in that last thrust is Trumbo's deep irritation with the utopian-minded vice of wishfully rewriting history, and his own fierce willingness to think freely, and face facts, come what may. That and his lifelong refusal to demonize his opponents makes him particularly valuable company now, after an act of war against the United States has prompted a fresh war of nerves in Washington, and any question of the current administration's tactics is sooner or later denounced as unpatriotic.

In such a climate, the choices people made in the late '40s and '50s are more relevant than ever, and a quarter century after his death, it is Trumbo who sets the most life-giving example.



The devil I am trying to catch, is that dark yearning for power that lurks in all of us, the perversion of love that is the inevitable consequence of power, the exquisite pleasures of perversion when power becomes absolute, and the dread realization that in a time when science has become the servant of politics-as-theology, it can happen again.



Dalton Trumbo

## A Man of the West

James Dalton Trumbo was born December 5, 1905, in Montrose, Colorado, descended from frontier settlers on both sides. Indeed, he appears to have inherited both his moustache and his hard squint from his maternal grandfather, a western sheriff. The family pulled up stakes and moved to Los Angeles after Trumbo's father fell ill in 1923. Young Trumbo dropped out of the University of Colorado (where he'd majored in journalism) and attempted to continue his studies at USC but was ultimately obliged to take a job in a bakery, which he held onto for half a dozen years while teaching himself to write.

He wrote, by his own later count, seven novels and upwards of 80 short stories in this time, "All rejected!" By the early 1930s, with both the Depression and Prohibition still in force, he tried his hand at bootlegging, and though this was another flop, he got a clever story out of it, which he promptly sold to *Vanity Fair*. His dry wit charmed *VF*'s glamorous West Coast editor, Clare Boothe Brokaw (later Clare Boothe Luce), who encouraged him to write about movies, and these gigs brought him to the attention of Warner Bros., which hired him as a reader for their story department.

When his first published novel, *Eclipse*, met with acclaim in 1934, Warners upgraded him to screenwriter, and Trumbo was launched on a prosperous, productive trajectory that lasted 10 years. He developed a reputation for being both versatile and fast. He could infuse entertainment with a touch of social-realism, as in *Prison Farm* (1936), or cleanly retrieve tender emotion from a small-town drama without toppling into glop, as in *A Man to Remember* (1938). He had an innate knack for toying with an audience. *Five Came Back* (1939), cowritten with Nathaniel West, has a natural suspense hard-wired into its title, because a lot more than five people survive the jungle air-crash with which it begins. The question of who's going to get it, and whether they're going to be eaten by cannibals or prey upon one another makes for a nicely knotted tightrope. The script amplifies this through a particularly clever, now much-imitated gimmick: An unseen cannibal tribe can be heard drumming from beyond the screen of trees, the instant the plane touches down. The survivors hear this, react to it, and refer to the drumming time and again, to such a degree that the racket becomes a character, until--right at the perfect moment--the drumming just stops, and the survivors are forced to work out their fates in a silence far more terrifying than any drumbeat.

One twist Trumbo and West added that looms in retrospect: They planted a Marxist onboard, a political prisoner the others treat like a criminal until he demonstrates that, of them all, he's the one with the most developed code of honor, sacrificing himself to save what's left of the group. Trumbo's politics were a natural outgrowth of the privations he'd suffered when the rest of the country was enjoying the boom of the '20s. Poverty for him was no theory and "workers of the world" no abstraction. He and West--for whom screenwriting was a quick means to underwrite his excellent novels, *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Day of the Locust*--shared both a sense of humor and a worldview. That the Marxist is the good guy is an impish touch, not a preachy one.

Both had worked hard to see the Screen Writers Guild through its birth pangs. The original Guild appeared to be destroyed in 1936 when the studios substituted their own union, Screen Playwrights Inc., and forced employees to join or be fired. Trumbo and West, along with Dashiell Hammett, Lillian Hellman, Dudley Nichols, and others, began meeting in secret at one another's houses, and thereby created the autonomous negotiating body we have today. This secrecy was all important, Trumbo felt: The Guild did not even reveal its existence until the groundwork was laid and it was ready to challenge the studio stranglehold to an open vote before the National Labor Relations Board, before whom Trumbo was the first speaker to testify. Years later, when Congress summoned him along with the rest of the Hollywood Ten, Trumbo refused to answer even the simplest questions regarding his Guild membership. "Mr. Chairman," he managed to blurt, between poundings of the gavel, "the rights of American labor to inviolably secret membership lists have been won in this country by a great cost of blood and a great cost in terms of hunger." His code of conduct was not ideological, but the core of his character, as a man with roots in the American frontier: the code of the straight shooter.



Dalton Trumbo as a 1920s child with his grandfather, mother Maud, and grandmother.

"Will you marry me?" was more or less the first question he asked Cleo Fincher (herself descended from early settlers) the night they met. Already engaged to someone else, she required some protracted wooing, and though she found Trumbo's madcap energy and eloquence captivating, she thought his proposal evidence that he was out of his mind. When her fiancé shortly cornered her into a hasty marriage, one Cleo instantly regretted, Trumbo, employing courtship skills that had apparently been honed during the high drama of the Guild's formation, hired a private detective to check out the groom's past and discovered, sure enough, that the man was already married. Cleo readily annulled that mistake, recognized her true love in Trumbo, and stole away with him to a remote ranch he'd bought on a hilltop in Ventura County, the Lazy T.

## Riding High

"How glad I am that I married this crazy man instead of some dull son of a bitch," Cleo told Trumbo's biographer Brian Cook decades later. "I had to get used to a few things," she admitted. "He used to spend days in the bathtub, soaking, writing, talking on the telephone."

There was no telephone at the ranch, but there was indoor plumbing. Trumbo's odd habit of writing while parked in a tub (subject of many a goofy photo) could now be indulged without outside interruption, and the first result was a great novel, *Johnny Got His Gun*. Told from the first-person viewpoint of a radically wounded soldier--a young man who has lost his eyes, tongue, teeth, lower jaw, ears, arms, and legs, in short everything with which he might signal to the outside world that he is mentally alive and fully conscious (which he is, to a horrifying degree)--Trumbo creates an archetype of the Unknown Soldier vivid enough to scare the piss out of infinite generations of young would-be recruits. The story is given weight by Trumbo's passionate identification with the young man in question: To anchor him, to make him specific, he gave him a western name, Joe Bonham, and much of his own past, including Colorado and the surprise move to Los Angeles; Joe is so individually alive that he much more forcefully becomes Everyman, as he lives out what must be anyone's nightmare.

For all that, it later became a bestseller and classroom perennial. But it was Trumbo's mixed fortune to first publish *Johnny Got His Gun* on September 3, 1939--two days after Hitler invaded Poland. So much for stopping that war! But as Trumbo was quick to assert, to the FBI and whomever else dropped by the ranch in the early days of World War II, he was not a pacifist. What he opposed was the idiocy of jingoism, the ghastly farce of asking young men to sacrifice themselves for too little. (Hello, Vietnam!)



The Trumbo family.

By the time the book came out, Trumbo was convinced that a war in Europe was both inevitable and necessary and found, to his dismay, that he was getting fan mail from isolationists, American Nazis, and anti-Semites. These letters were so disturbed and disturbing that he patriotically alerted the FBI, which is why they showed up at the ranch; to his further dismay the agents had little or no interest in perusing these letters or pursuing their authors. They were much more curious about Trumbo himself, his politics and involvements. "Serves me right!" he laughed later, confronting the irony that he'd brought governmental inquiry down on himself, out of his own eagerness to name names. That he'd once been so loyally ready to denounce people whose politics he found repugnant no doubt

strengthened the consolation he later tendered to Elia Kazan, Dmytryk, and others who made their choices out of similar principle.

He made the jump from writing cheapies for Warner Bros. and RKO to top-shelf, top-dollar projects at MGM. *Kitty Foyle* (1941) provided Ginger Rogers with her first strictly dramatic role and won Trumbo his first Oscar nomination. *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo* (1943) is a model of action-packed authenticity: Trumbo keeps to the facts, avoids the verbal flag-waving that mars so many films of the era, and makes bravery visible by treating it as something manifested in hard, exacting work.

Before shipping off to war as a reporter, Trumbo joined the Communist Party in December 1943. "To me, it was not a matter of great consequence," he later told Brian Cook. "It represented no significant change in my thought or in my life." (He would drift away from the party just as lightly, in 1948--the 85-mile drive from the Lazy T to meetings became too much--but for a moment in the mid-50s, he briefly rejoined in solidarity with a current protest.) He wrote about his journey through the Pacific theater of the war for the Writers Guild magazine *The Screen Writer* (the ancestor of *Written By*), of which he was founding editor.



**When Jesse Lasky Jr., vice president of the Writers Guild, accepted the Academy Award for best original screenplay for *The Brave One*, he**

He also negotiated a fresh contract: \$3,000 per week or \$75,000 per picture and, as he preferred, no layoffs for the period of the contract, and no morality clause. (As Cook points out in his Trumbo biography, Louis B. Mayer was to regret that last giveaway because it made it harder, though not impossible, to terminate this deal when the blacklist intervened.) Trumbo bought a house in Beverly Hills to be closer to the action and used the surplus of free time to begin an ambitious war novel set in the South Pacific, a work that was lost in the psychological bonfires that followed 1947.

### Time Lost & Time Regained

Two of the most lucid and compelling memoirs of that time are by men who named names: Elia Kazan's *A Life* and *Odd Man Out* by Edward Dmytryk. Neither man brags about the choices he made, yet both stand by their actions. Both were immigrants (Kazan from Greece, Dmytryk from Canada), and both were committed to visions of a better world, which led them, first, to embrace the communist party and then to reject it. Both found the party's dictates oppressive, and when push came to shove, neither cared to live what they viewed as a lie. Both resisted questioning by congress--Kazan adamantly refused to name names when first called; Dmytryk, in lock step with his colleagues in the Hollywood Ten, went to prison for his initial silence.

Both reversed themselves after a great deal of soul-searching. In effect, each asked himself: Why should I be loyal to a party I not only don't believe in but have come to despise? "Memories I'd pushed aside now thrust themselves forward for attention," Elia Kazan recounts. "I recalled the scene on the lawn of the Hotel Marik in Cuernavaca, where John Steinbeck and I had been instructed how to rewrite our *Zapata* screenplay by [Gabriel] Figueroa and the man whose name I'd not been given... I recalled how the party had bullied [Budd Schulberg and Albert Maltz] and how Budd had stood firm and Albert had not... I heard again in my memory the voice, arrogant and absolute, of the Man From Detroit as he humiliated me before my 'comrades' in Lee Strasberg's apartment over Sutter's bakery... The reason I resigned from the party was not their politics but their determination to control artists by working behind the scenes."

Dmytryk felt that the Hollywood Ten's first confrontation with Congress (which rapidly deteriorated into a shouting match) might have had a more peaceful outcome--that indeed there might have been less furor and no blacklist--except that the Communist Party, pressuring Dmytryk and the rest of the Ten, wanted the propaganda advantage of a defiant martyrdom. "The Ten had been sacrificed to the Party's purpose," he writes in *Odd Man Out*. "If I were going to be a martyr, I wanted the privilege of choosing my martyrdom, and making my family suffer to protect American representatives of a foreign agency would certainly not be it."

"Dalton Trumbo," he adds, "was a puzzle--at least to me... Until the hearings, I had never considered him a communist [Dmytryk by contrast had been extremely active and passionate], and to this day I have not been able to understand how such an inner-directed and unfanatical man could have maintained a loyalty to an organization as doctrinaire as the Communist Party."

explained to a swell of warm applause that "Mr. Rich is right now at the hospital, waiting for his wife to give birth." This was what Lasky had been told at any rate, but an enterprising reporter checked every maternity ward in Los Angeles County and could find no Mrs. Robert Rich in any of them. It didn't take long for the story to break wide open: Trumbo was the story's author.



Perhaps his lack of fanaticism is a key. Had there been no Karl Marx, Trumbo might have had to invent him; his politics were rooted in populism and progress, and his reclusive rancher's nature coolly left him to his own devices as a thinker. His passions were engaged by character, not politics. As the work of his later life would show, he could treat anyone's point of view with respect. Refusing to cooperate with the House Committee on Un-American Activities wasn't a question of "loyalty," but of being true to his word. In this, his frontier roots gave him an advantage. For him, the United States was a heritage no self-appointed committee could reshape, and no party for that matter. He could take communist membership or leave it because his actual agenda in life lay elsewhere.

This might explain too why he was such a demon of energy during the next decade and a half, when circumstance was so dead set against him. The interruption of his cushy MGM salary, the looming term of a year in prison and its attendant legal fees, left him scrambling. He scuttled any plans for a novel and immediately set about cultivating a network of trusted allies who could convey scripts and money back and forth between himself and willing producers. Nearly all were willing. Getting a script from Trumbo at a tenth his former fee was a discount that transcended politics. Trumbo also had a great natural facility: He could write fast and camera ready.

The scripts he wrote in this period are vibrant, unpretentious, dynamic, and continue to be influential. *Gun Crazy* (1950) turns two blissfully amoral lovers loose on the American landscape, robbing banks and Freudianly fondling their guns two decades ahead of Bonnie and Clyde. *The Prowler* (1951), a moody thriller Trumbo wrote using his friend Hugo Butler as a front, dramatized the notion of "the stalker" a good three decades before we had the proper word for one. (Joseph Losey, who directed it, was also shortly blacklisted, as was Hugo.) Trumbo moved with his family to Mexico, where bullfighting caught his eye, and the true story of a young boy saving his pet bull from death in the ring became *The Brave One*, an original he sold to the King Brothers (his most faithful sponsors in those times) under the name Robert Rich.



Dalton Trumbo and William Holden roaming the Paramount studio streets in 1942.

**The film that resulted in 1956 won an Oscar. There was a moment of curious silence after Deborah Kerr read the name in the envelope: Is Mr. Rich here?**

**Jesse Lasky Jr., vice president of the Writers Guild, accepted the award and explained to a swell of warm applause that "Mr. Rich is right now at the hospital, waiting for his wife to give birth." This was what Lasky had been told, at any rate--but an enterprising reporter, eager for a quote, checked every maternity ward in Los Angeles County and could find no Mrs. Robert Rich in any of them. It didn't take long for the story to break wide open after that. Enough people on the inside knew exactly who Robert Rich was, and it was too hilarious a fact to keep under wraps. Very soon, the King Brothers, eager to fend off lawsuits from a pack of false Riches, admitted for the record that Trumbo was the story's**

**author.**

Trumbo seized this opportunity and worked it. He gave interviews far and wide; he matched wits with hostile attackers on live TV, and from the eminence of that phantom Oscar held the blacklist up to ridicule. He sincerely offered to write a major motion picture free of charge for any producer willing to let him sign his own name.

Kirk Douglas and Otto Preminger, the prime movers behind *Spartacus* and *Exodus*, respectively, didn't quite take him up on this, and at first hired him anonymously, yet both men took his point to heart. Both were fighters, both despised the blacklist, and when the time came, both saw to it that the title read: Screenplay by Dalton Trumbo.

## Aurochs & Angels

Free at last to work in his own name on his own well-paid terms in the 1960s, Trumbo signed aboard works of varied quality--*Lonely Are the Brave* (1962), a contemporary Western that was excellent; and *The Sandpiper* (1965), which was excremental, though as Trumbo liked to point out, its stars, Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, had by then transcended the need to become other characters or even memorize lines. *Hawaii* (1966) involved heaps of rewriting. At one point, under the direction of Fred Zinneman, it was to be two movies, released back to back; then George Roy Hill came aboard, and it became one movie, then two again; then they cut the budget.

Trumbo took such lunacy in stride and worked up a script of *Johnny Got His Gun*, which he directed himself in 1971. At age 65, he demonstrated youthful flair in this new departure. The film, despite describing the most depressing predicament in the universe, is beautifully made, swimmingly paced and cut in keeping with the streams of consciousness that propel the book. Not surprisingly, the film was a smash at the Cannes Film Festival, where it won both the Jury Prize and the International Critics Award. A snarl in the film's investment setup prevented Trumbo from capitalizing on this success as readily as he might have done in today's indie world. But even so, the acclaim opened the way to what might have been a great second career--except that his health caught up with him. Five decades of chain-smoking cost him a lung in 1973, and a heart attack took his life September 10, 1976.



become the servant of politics-as-theology, it can happen again."



Trumbo among those protesting the impending incarceration of the Hollywood Ten, which also included Adrian Scott, Edward Dmytryk, Sam Ornitz, Lester Cole, Herbert Biberman, Albert Maltz, Alvah Bessie, John Howard Lawson, and Ring Lardner, Jr. (below, left).

On his desk was the manuscript of a massively ambitious novel that he had been wrestling with for 16 years, ever since the demise of the blacklist. Called *Night of the Aurochs* (the title under which it was published in 1979) or *Grieben* (the name of its central character, an unrepentant Nazi), the novel called upon every atom of Trumbo's ambition, and as he saw it, his honesty. "The thing I am after here," he wrote one friend, "the devil I am trying to catch, is that dark yearning for power that lurks in all of us, the perversion of love that is the inevitable consequence of power, the exquisite pleasures of perversion when power becomes absolute, and the dread realization that in a time when science has

That's a mighty tall order, but what Trumbo left, if only in fragments, amounts to a mighty book. The excellent edition organized by Robert Kirsch gives us 10 compact, highly charged chapters of Grieben's autobiography, coupled with the character's wartime diaries and a lengthy treatment written in the third-person by Trumbo, which set forth the larger plan for the book. Taken together, they don't read like a work of fiction at all but the scholarly biography of an actual historical figure, such is Trumbo's ability to think past his own prejudices and slip into a committed Nazi's psyche.

"To whom is it not clear," Grieben asks, "that God is neither good nor evil but simply All? My life is proof.... There comes a moment in every man's life (if he is alert to it and understands its meaning) when complete power over something--a beast, a woman, even a man, sometimes mankind--lies in his hands or the hands of his comrades like a fluttering captive bird. In that supreme instant man's power fuses with God's to become power absolute, that blinding apotheosis of divinity which no man, however base or cowardly, can reject... The good and evil of Godhood."

In a climate haunted by the likes of such political theologians as Osama bin Laden, Trumbo's channeling of Grieben has prophetic power and value. Small wonder, living with such a double monster in his head, that he felt so forgiving toward his more immediate enemies--or that he should be accused by his old friend Maltz of moral relativism in being so forgiving.

Trumbo never lost sight of right and wrong. Not as a writer, not as a political figure, not as a human being. Nor was he losing it by inhabiting Grieben--though it often must have seemed so and made work on that novel extra hard. No, he was continuing his life's work, that epic attempt to find the core of humanity in those he most opposed. In finding it, honor bid him to lay claim to it--and declare that oneness openly, in the interest of healing his community.

A human being who can do that is nobody's victim.

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