The Works of Richard Wright, as Written

By Eleanor Blau
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The Arts

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THE COMMITMENTS

The hard-hitting works of Richard Wright, which influenced generations of writers, were meant to be even stronger stuff. His 1940 novel "Native Son," about a young black man growing up in Chicago's South Side slums, his 1945 memoir "Black Boy," about his own early years in the South, and other books were changed or cut, mostly because of their sexual, political or racial candor.

But the unexpurgated Richard Wright is on the horizon, in two volumes to be published in October by the Library of America.

To try to determine his intentions, the publishers perused correspondence and manuscripts. They even discovered page proofs for "Native Son" that they say had been overlooked by scholars because they were catalogued in an unusual way at Yale University. Works Older and New

These will be the 55th and 56th volumes of Library of America, a nine-year-old nonprofit house dedicated to making available the works of major American authors. One Wright volume will include early works: "Native Son," "Lawd Today!" and "Uncle Tom's Children"; the other volume, later works: "Black Boy," "American Hunger" and "The Outsider."

Extensive notes on the cuts and revisions are provided along with a chronology of the author's career, from his birth in 1908 near Natchez, Miss., to his years in Chicago and New York, his expatriate life in postwar Paris and his death in 1960.

"Native Son" was a best seller, the first by a black American, and it broke new ground. While Faulkner, for example, had dealt pessimistically with race in America, no authors before Wright had written of it so boldly or bleakly, said Arnold Rampersad, a Princeton University professor and biographer of Langston Hughes, who edited the new volumes. 'Will to Violence'

It was Wright, he said, who first addressed the consequences of slavery, segregation and racism: "the dehumanization of blacks," their hatred of whites and their "will to violence aimed at whites and fellow blacks," Professor Rampersad said.

Both "Native Son" and "Black Boy" were about to be published by Harper & Brothers in the forms Wright wanted when the Book-of-the-Month Club stepped in; the club would offer the books, it decided in each case, but with changes. The opportunity to reach so many readers and make more money through the book club was not something the author could refuse, Professor Rampersad said.

"I don't think of the Book-of-the-Month Club as the villains," Professor Rampersad added. "You have to safeguard your product." The members of the club's selection committee were "pretty enlightened," he said, "but they were keenly aware of an audience not as enlightened as they were."

Or as Hanna M. Bercovitch, the editor in chief of the Library of America, put it: "It was such a daring thing for them to do that I'm surprised they took the book at all. It was a pretty powerful book even in its earlier version."

The page proofs discovered at the Beinecke Library at Yale were the final version of "Native Son" that Harper & Brothers had been about to publish, and they are the version in the new edition. A Sexual Attraction Deleted

Its deleted sections made explicit what was hardly more than implied in the published version: that Bigger Thomas, the young black protagonist, is sexually attracted to Mary Dalton, the white woman he winds up smothering.

"To cut that out is to make Bigger almost incomprehensible, almost inhuman," Professor Rampersad said.

The omitted sections include one in a movie house in which Bigger and a friend masturbate and then watch a newsreel about debutantes including Mary Dalton, whose father he is about to work for. Conveying the book club's objection to that part, Wright's editor and friend at Harper & Brothers, Edward Aswell, wrote him: "They are not a particularly squeamish crowd, but that scene, after all, is a bit on the raw side. I daresay you could revise it in a way to suggest what happens rather than tell it explicitly."

Later deleted passages involve Bigger driving a car and watching in the mirror as Mary and her boyfriend make love in the back seat, and then Bigger carrying the intoxicated woman to her bed.

It was not just prudishness but the taboo of sex between whites and blacks that prompted the changes, Professor Rampersad said. "It's as if the editors were saying murder is fine, but do not think of sex," he said. "You would have thought the ultimate horror was the killing of Mary Dalton." An Increasing Bigotry

"Black Boy" was only the first part of Wright's autobiography, about his attempts to escape poverty, ignorance, fear and bigotry in the South. In the second part, published in 1977 as "American Hunger," he flees to the North just before the Depression; finds, among other things, more bigotry, and concludes that he can rely only on himself and become a writer.

He said in his diary that he thought Communists had pressured the club to omit the second half, which tells of his membership in the Communist Party and then his disillusionment with it.

"This was 1944, and Russia was our ally in the Second World War," Ms. Bercovitch noted. "And there may have been the feeling of 'do we really want to knock the Communist Party at this time?' " The two parts are published together in the new edition as "Black Boy (American Hunger)."

Discussing the new volumes the other day in the Library of America's offices on East 60th Street, Professor Rampersad said, "Wright was just as hard on black American culture as he was on white culture." In "How 'Bigger' Was Born," an essay included in the volumes, Wright says, "I became convinced that if I did not write of Bigger as I saw and felt him, I'd be acting out of fear."

"Lawd Today!" was Wright's first novel, published posthumously in 1963 with much tampering. "They did silly things I'll never understand," Ms. Bercovitch said, noting that the editors had inconsistently changed only some of Wright's experimental prose. Wright, probably influenced by Faulkner, Dos Passos and Joyce, she said, "used wordplay, fooled around with punctuation" and incorporated news headlines, songs and rhyming games for an account of one day in the life of four black postal workers in Chicago.

Despite its playful tone, the work is pessimistic. The workers, Professor Rampersad said, are shown as "aimless and dominated by sex and drink." 'He Sees Danger'

"The Outsider" was published in 1953 when the author was living in France. It was the McCarthy era, and Wright, though he had condemned Communism, was worried he would be called to testify, Ms. Bercovitch said.

"I'm not a political scientist," Professor Rampersad said, "but it seems to me 'The Outsider' is a prophetic book." The novel looks at totalitarianism of the right and left, and predicts the rise of religious fundamentalism. "He sees danger in each of the three," he said. "It is a thesis novel and a little tough going, but it is a book people should ponder."

The book recounts a black man's doomed attempt to lead a new life by taking on a new identity. A section was cut by Harper & Brothers and "paragraphs all over the place, here and there, were dropped," Ms. Bercovitch said.

"Wright had a new editor and this guy seemed to have difficulty understanding what the book was about," she said.

"It is a complicated, existential, philosophical book," she said, yet letters to Wright show his editor wanted to reduce it to a murder mystery. "He said, 'Why don't you leave out all this about Fascists?' Wright very reluctantly threw up his hands; he had two days to read proof. So we went back to Wright's last typescript that he submitted to the publisher and tried to give him back his book."

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