Earlier this year, Houghton Library announced one of the most exciting donations in its history: the Donald and Mary Hyde Collection of Dr. Samuel Johnson. Started by the Hydes in the early 1940s and continually expanded by Mary Hyde (later Viscountess Eccles) until her death last year, the collection is not just one of the world’s great archives of eighteenth-century English literature, with more than 4,000 books and 5,500 letters and manuscripts. Still more important, it is the world’s best collection of documents relating to the life and work of Samuel Johnson. As Mary Hyde wrote, “We do not believe it extravagant to claim more manuscript material of Johnson in one place than at any time since his death.” And a tour of the collection, now installed in the Donald Hyde Rooms on the second floor of Houghton Library, offers a uniquely intimate view of one of the best-loved writers who ever lived.

It is fitting that a great collector should be responsible for bringing Johnson to Harvard, because it was a great book collection that helped to make Johnson’s name. In the early eighteenth century, Robert Harley—the earl of Oxford, and prime minister under Queen Anne—began to assemble a collection of rare English pamphlets, books, and manuscripts. By the time of his son’s death, when the so-called Harleian Library was put up for sale, it contained some 50,000 books and 350,000 pamphlets, on every imaginable subject. An enterprising bookseller, Thomas Osborne, bought the library for the huge sum of £13,000 and immediately started to look for ways to recoup his investment. He decided that the best way to arouse public in-
terest would be to publish a catalog of the unparalleled collection. And his choice for the cataloger was a 33-year-old journalist, already becoming famous for his omnivorous reading and masterful prose: Samuel Johnson.

Reading through more than 35,000 volumes in the Harleian Library, and writing Latin descriptions of their contents, took Johnson (and a partner, William Oldys) only a little more than a year. Working, as his friend John Hawkins said, like “a lion in harness,” Johnson performed a polymathic feat that—in the words of his foremost modern biographer, Harvard’s Walter Jackson Bate—rivaled those of “the great Renaissance scholars who had taken all knowledge for their province.” And he had done it, as he would all his major work, on a strictly commercial basis. As Johnson would declare in the preface to his Dictionary of the English Language, his triumphs were achieved “without any patronage of the great; not in the soft obscurities of retirement, or under the shelter of academic bower, but amidst inconvenience and distraction, in sickness and in sorrow.” Thanks to the Harleian Library, Johnson emerged as a new type in literary history: the hack as genius.

Typically Johnsonian, too, was the way he turned the catalog into an occasion for moral instruction. Few writers have ever been as sincerely dedicated to justice as Samuel Johnson, or demonstrated a piety so completely without sanctimony. In everything he read and wrote, Johnson was on the lookout for moral examples—of virtue to be emulated, of vice to be avoided—and he would have considered himself derelict not to share them with his readers. So the “Account of the Harleian Library” became an opportunity “to reflect on the character of the late proprietors, and to pay some tribute of veneration to their ardor for literature, to that generous and exalted curiosity which they gratified with incessant searches and immense expense, and to which they dedicated that time, and that superfluity of fortune, which many others of their rank employ in the pursuit of contemptible amusements, or the gratification of guilty passions. And, surely, every man who considers learning as ornamental and advantageous to the community must allow them the honour of public benefactors who have introduced amongst us authors not hitherto well known, and added to the literary treasures of their native country.”

Of course, Donald and Mary Hyde did not set out to earn an encomium like this when they began their own incomparable collection of “literary treasures” more than 60 years ago. As Mary Hyde wrote in a privately published memoir, they acquired their first Johnson books almost by accident. In 1940, just months after their marriage, Mary went to a rare-book sale in Detroit and returned with some expensive Elizabethan items (one of which, she later discovered, was a forgery). Her husband “grumbled on the basis of extravagance,” whereupon “the bride, with greater knowledge of male psychology than of books, returned to the exhibit and purchased for her husband run-of-the-mill first editions of Boswell’s Life of Johnson and Johnson’s Dictionary.” With those apologetic gifts began the collection that was eventually to make the Hydes’ home, Four Oaks Farm in Somerville, New Jersey, the world’s leading Johnson archive.

Now that the collection is at Harvard, it will be even easier for pilgrims to see the relics of Samuel Johnson. (A small, delightful exhibition is on display to the public in the Donald Hyde Rooms.) And “pilgrims” is the right word. Ever since Boswell—who exhorted himself in his diary, “Think of Johnson,” “Remember Johnson,” “Re Johnson”—readers of Johnson have been drawn to him with a more than literary admiration and reverence. The effect hasn’t diminished with time: two centuries after Boswell, Bate declared that “One of the first effects [Johnson] has on us is that we find ourselves catching, by contagion, something of his courage.” Thanks to the psychological insight of his own works, and the remarkable honesty of Boswell’s Life, Johnson can be known more completely than almost any other great writer.

Each of the treasures in the Hyde Collection opens a window onto Johnson’s life, offering direct access to his experience. This intimacy is best symbolized by an item displayed in the vestibule of the Hyde Rooms, just to the right of the entrance: Dr. Johnson’s teapot. Just big enough to make two or three cups at a time, it must have been refilled more or less nonstop, since Johnson was a fanatical drinker of what he called “this watery luxury.” As Boswell wrote, “I suppose no person ever enjoyed with more relish the infusion of that fragrant leaf than Johnson. The quantities that he drank of it at all hours were so great, that his nerves must have been uncommonly strong, not to have been extremely relaxed by such an intemperate use of it.”

It is strangely moving to realize that this is the very pot which Johnson used every day, brewing up fuel for his nervous, restless mind. No wonder that, when the Hydes bought the teapot early in their collecting career, they threw a celebratory party, where “for the first time in some years tea poured from Dr. Johnson’s pot.” (There were even servants in eighteenth-century costume—a detail that tells us something about the milieu in which the Hyde Collection was assembled.) As Mary Hyde wrote, “There is an emotional pleasure that is indescribable in touching the past so closely.”

The story of Samuel Johnson revealed in the Hyde Collection begins with...
his father. When Samuel was born in 1709, Michael Johnson was a successful bookseller in the provincial town of Lichfield; the collection includes a Bible bound by him. But Michael's luck soon changed for the worse, and as Samuel grew older the family could barely stay solvent. Johnson learned early on the lesson he would repeat in his poem “London,” whose original manuscript is one of the jewels of the Hyde collection: “This mournful truth is everywhere confessed, / SLOW RISES WORTH, BY POVERTY DEPRESSED.”

Johnson's own rise was especially slow. At 18 he managed to win a place at Pembroke College, Oxford; but as Boswell records, “his poverty [was] so extreme, that his shoes were worn out, and his feet appeared through them,” leaving him too embarrassed to venture out of his rooms for lectures. His fellow students recognized his plight, and one morning an anonymous donor “set a pair of new shoes at his door”; but Johnson, already fiercely independent, “threw them away with indignation.” After a little more than a year, he was forced to leave Oxford for good.

This early setback left Johnson prey to another miserable legacy from his father: his intense depression. Michael Johnson, as Boswell put it, suffered from a “disease, the nature of which eludes the most minute enquiry, though the effects are well known to be a weariness of life, an unconcern about those things which agitate the greater part of mankind, and a general sensation of gloomy wretchedness.” From him then his son inherited, with some other qualities, “a vile melancholy.” And when he left Oxford, with no hope for further education and no career prospects, Johnson was exposed to the full force of this wretchedness: “he felt himself overwhelmed with an horrible hypochondria, with perpetual irritation, fretfulness, and impatience; and with a dejection, gloom, and despair, which made existence misery.” From this dismal malady he never afterwards was perfectly relieved; and all his labors, and all his enjoyments, were but temporary interruptions of its baleful influence.” One of several extraordinary paintings in the Donald Hyde Rooms is the imaginary portrait by Sir Joshua Reynolds of “the Infant Johnson,” which shows him already unmistakably afflicted with melancholy, a baby with grave and downcast eyes (see page 51).

Johnson's melancholy remained the ground note of his existence; all his accomplishments were wrested from it with the utmost effort. This first overture to Cave came to nothing. But three years later, Johnson—now 28, married, and having failed completely in his attempt to open a school—resolved to force himself on the literary world, in the only way possible: he would go to London. London, as Boswell declared, was “the great field of genius and exertion, where talents of every kind have the fullest scope, and the highest encouragement”; but it was also the scene of cutthroat competition. According to Bate, “At no time in modern history has it been more difficult for an English writer to get started, if he lacked money of his own or influential friends, than during the second quarter of the eighteenth century.”

Johnson arrived in town, as he later remembered, with “two pence halfpenny in his pocket.” But he quickly made a connection with Cave—when he first saw the offices of the Gentleman's Magazine, he recalled, he “beheld it with reverence”—and soon he was a regular contributor. The shelves of the Hyde Rooms display a complete set of the journal—in folio volumes still remarkably sturdy, under their peeling bindings—where Johnson's first writing appeared. But while he started out as a Grub Street journalist—one of the guild he called “the drudges of the pen, the manufacturers of literature”—Johnson quickly demonstrated his gift for raising the ephemeral to permanence.

From 1741 to 1744, for example, he supplied the Gentleman's Magazine with reports of parliamentary debates. Given that Parliament had prohibited reporting on its sessions, and that Johnson himself never attended the House of Commons more than once, this might seem a hopeless assignment. But Johnson decided that he would write England's statesmen the speeches they ought to have delivered; and so eloquent were his inventions that they were quickly claimed as fact. Politicians began to be praised for orations that Johnson had invented, based on nothing but a list of speakers and some scanty notes. (At the end of his life, seeing how his invented reports were being taken as historical fact, Johnson went through his old set of the Gentleman's Magazine and indicated all the speeches he had made up.) No less an authority than the statesman and orator Edmund Burke declared that if Johnson “had come early into parliament, he certainly would have been the greatest speaker that ever was there.”

It was on the strength of accomplishments like the parliamentary reports and the Harleian Library catalog that Johnson was chosen by a consortium of London booksellers for a titanic undertaking: to edit the first comprehensive dictionary of the English language. In other countries, this job had been performed by an academy of scholars, with government support. In England it would be a strictly commercial proposition: Johnson received an advance of £1,575, out of which he had to pay all his expenses, including salaries for research assistants and clerks. Amazingly, it took Johnson, working as sole editor, just nine years to do what, in France, had taken 40 experts 40 years to accomplish. His Dictionary of the English Language, with more than 30,000 words and 14,000 illustrative quotations, was published in 1755. It laid the foundation for every later English dictionary and, with its elegant definitions and wide-ranging examples, is still a very enjoyable book to read.
The story of the Dictionary is marvelously well represented in the Hyde Collection. The manuscript is lost, according to legend, Mary Hyde wrote, it was "used to cover jelly jars in a Lichfield attic, the portion of it surviving this treatment later being eaten by rats." In general, "throughout his life Johnson was notoriously indifferent to the fate of his manuscripts." But the Hyde Collection has rescued the holograph of Johnson's "Plan for the Dictionary," which was used to advertise it to subscribers. It also contains one of the few surviving books marked up by Johnson in the course of his research. As Boswell records, Johnson didn't hesitate to underline words even in books he borrowed from friends, which he would return "so defaced as to be scarcely worth owning, and yet, some of his friends were glad to receive and entertain them as curiosities." Johnson's own copy of the Aeneid, with his bold notations, is one of the rare "curiosities" of the Hyde Collection.

The collection also includes the copy of the Dictionary owned by Lord Chesterfield—a concrete link to one of the fabled episodes in English literary history. Chesterfield was a noted patron of the arts, and when Johnson first planned the dictionary he hoped to receive his support, even sending Chesterfield the manuscript of the "Plan" for his comment. But Chesterfield did not come through, and for almost a decade Johnson worked on without any "patronage of the great." Only when the Dictionary was about to appear did Chesterfield write an article about it, suggesting that he had been personally connected with the project all along. This provoked Johnson's famous letter of rebuke, which survives in the Hyde Collection in a contemporary holograph (though the hand is not Johnson's):

Is not a patron, my Lord, one who looks with unconcern on a man struggling for life in the water and when he has reached ground encumbers him with help? The notice which you have been pleased to take of my labours, had it been early, had been kind; but it has been delayed till I am indifferent and cannot enjoy it, till I am solitary and cannot impart it, till I am known and do not want it.

More than a superb example of Johnson's personality and prose, the letter to Chesterfield marked a turning point in the history of English literature. No longer would authors rely, as they had since Elizabethan times, on the largesse of aristocrats; they could now turn to a large reading public for customers and support themselves in proud independence. Johnson's own career proved how much could be accomplished by a freelance writer, depending on no one but booksellers and book buyers for his livelihood: "No man who ever lived by literature," he bragged to Boswell, "has lived more independently than I have done." Johnson's own copy of Pope's poetical works, which he had given to Boswell on a tour of the country, became one of the rare "curiosities" of the Hyde Collection.

The Rambler, the philosophical tale that became the most popular of Johnson's works, was written in 10 days, in March 1750 to March 1752. Frequently, he would finish an essay just before the deadline and dispatch it to the printer without reading it over. Similarly, Johnson's edition of Shakespeare—whose preface remains a landmark of literary criticism—was commissioned by booksellers eager to profit from the growing cult of the Bard. Johnson's own copy of the Aeneid, with his bold notations, is one of the rare "curiosities" of the Hyde Collection.

"No man but a blockhead ever wrote except for money," Boswell, "has lived more independently than I have done." Johnson's own copy of Pope's poetical works, which he had given to Boswell on a tour of the country, became one of the rare "curiosities" of the Hyde Collection.
a painting. Hanging above a seminar table in the Donald Hyde Rooms is a canvas by E.M. Ward, showing Johnson reading a manuscript, as Oliver Goldsmith anxiously looks over his shoulder. It is a dramatization of one of Johnson’s best-known anecdotes, transcribed by Boswell in the Life.

I received one morning a message from poor Goldsmith that he was in great distress, and as it was not in his power to come to me, begging that I would come to him as soon as possible. I sent him a guinea, and promised to come to him directly. I accordingly went as soon as I was drest, and found that his landlady had arrested him for his rent, at which he was in a violent passion. I perceived that he had already changed my guinea, and had got a bottle of Madeira and a glass before him. I put the cork into the bottle, desired he would be calm, and began to talk to him of the means by which he might be extricated. He then told me that he had a novel ready for the press, which he proposed to me. I looked into it, and saw its merit; told the landlady I should soon return, and having gone to a bookseller, sold it for sixty pounds. I brought Goldsmith the money, and he discharged his rent, not without rating his landlady in a high tone for having used him so ill.

The novel was *The Vicar of Wakefield*, one of the masterpieces of eighteenth-century literature. Part of the enduring charm of Johnson’s world is this image of geniuses living by their wits in an unforgiving capital. With the rise of the Romantic poets in the nineteenth century, artistic genius became a defiantly anti-commercial concept, associated with Nature and solitude; in Johnson’s London, you had to be able to write for money and posterity at the same time.

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As the Ward painting shows, the life of the London writer was made possible, and glorious, by friendship. Johnson hated solitude, which exposed him to the assaults of melancholy—“The great business of his life,” he admitted, “was to escape from himself.” In all his writings, he celebrates “society”—in the sense of friendship, good company, witty conversation—as one of life’s few redeeming pleasures. “Man may indeed preserve his existence in solitude,” he declares in one essay, “but can enjoy it only in society.” And his friends were some of the greatest men of the age—Burke, Reynolds, Goldsmith, and the celebrated actor David Garrick.

Yet as he grew older, Johnson was often very lonely. After the death of his wife, in 1752, he had no family to speak of; he opened his rooms to a variety of eccentric lodgers, mainly, it seems, in order to have someone to talk to at night. That is why meeting the Thrales, in 1765, was such a piece of good luck for him. Henry Thrale, a wealthy brewer and member of Parliament, and his wife, Hester, an intelligent and sociable woman, were much younger than Johnson; but they embraced him readily, and soon began to treat him as a member of the family. As Boswell wrote, “Johnson’s introduction into Mr. Thrale’s family contributed so much to the happiness of his life.” For 15 years, Johnson spent several days a week with the Thrales, in London or at their country house in Streatham. One of the most cleverly chosen items in the Hyde Collection is the Streatham library’s copy of Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy*—a book Johnson was unusually well qualified to appreciate.

Johnson’s friendship with the Thrales is also responsible for the most intimate and moving items in the Hyde Collection. After Henry Thrale’s death in 1781, Hester fell in love with an Italian musician, Gabriel Piozzi, whose nationality and social position—not to mention his Catholicism—made him utterly unacceptable to her friends and relations. Preoccupied with the love affair, she grew tired of dealing with Johnson’s emotional and material needs, and began to neglect him. Cruelly misrepresenting their years of friendship, she wrote in her diary that “I begin to see (now every thing shews it) that Johnson’s Connection with me is merely an interested one...only wish’d to find in me a careful Nurse and humble Friend for his sick and his lounging hours...He cares more for my roast Beef & plumb Pudden which he now devours too dirtily for endurance.” In the Life, Boswell reproved her coldness: “Alas! how different is this from the declarations which I have heard Mrs. Thrale make in his life-time, without a single murmur against any peculiarities, or against any one circumstance which attended their intimacy.” (Boswell’s rivalry with Mrs. Thrale for Johnson’s affections is treated in detail in Mary Hyde’s book, *The Impossible Friendship*. )
The final straw came when Mrs. Thrale announced her intention of becoming Mrs. Piozzi, which would mean moving to Italy and leaving her family behind. Johnson, hurt by her desertion and scandalized by her choice, wrote her a furious note, disguising his pain as indignation. This note, a small rectangular sheet covered in Johnson’s firm handwriting, is perhaps the most extraordinary item in the Hyde Collection, a fragment of heartbreak preserved under glass:

Madam
If I interpret your letter right, you are ignominiously married; if it is yet undone, let us once talk together. If you have abandoned your children and your religion, God forgive your wickedness; if you have forfeited your fame, and your country, may your folly do no further mischief.

If the last act is yet to do, I, who have loved you, esteemed you, reverenced you, and served you, I who long thought you the first of human kind, entreat that before your fate is irrevocable, I may once more see you. I was, I once was,

Madam, most truly yours,
Sam. Johnson

The most moving thing in the note is the postscript, written vertically down the left side of the page: “I will come down if you permit it.” Even as he insults her, it is clear, what Johnson really wants is to be accepted once again.

But it was not to be. Mrs. Thrale, quite naturally, chose her lover over her friend. Her response to Johnson, written in a large determined hand, is preserved in the Hyde Collection alongside his note: “I have this morning received from you so rough a letter, in reply to one which was both tenderly and respectfully written, that I am forced to desire the conclusion of a correspondence which I can bear to continue no longer.” It marked the end of one of the closest relationships in Johnson’s life. Just a few months later, as Johnson lay dying, a visitor asked him if he still talked with Mrs. Thrale. He responded with wounded rage: “I drive her quite from my mind. If I meet with one of her letters, I burn it immediately. I have burnt all I can find. I never speak of her, and I desire never to hear of her more.”

Johnson died on December 13, 1784, at the age of 75. Widespread shock at the loss of such a towering figure—“I could not believe it,” Boswell wrote, “My imagination was not convinced”—gave way to a frenzy of biographical curiosity. (As well as more superficial interest: the Hyde Collection includes a tiny volume, barely larger than a matchbook, filled with portraits of Johnson, for those who merely wanted a likeness of the great man.) The day after he learned of his friend’s death, Boswell was contacted by a bookseller with a proposal for an “instant book” about Johnson, to be published in just two months. Boswell refused, knowing that the work he had in mind would take much longer. Books by Johnson’s friend and executor John Hawkins, and by Mrs. Piozzi, had come and gone by the time Boswell’s enormous Life was published, to great acclaim and brisk sales, in 1791. (The story of the making of the Life is told in the very entertaining book Boswell’s Presumptuous Task, by Adam Sisman.)

Naturally, the Hyde Collection contains a wealth of Boswelliana, including 12 copies of the first edition of the Life, the copies owned by Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Stevenson—not to mention Boswell’s corrected proof sheets and several extracts he copied from Johnson’s diaries. Most interesting of all is Mrs. Piozzi’s copy of the Life, filled with disputatious notes. In the Hyde Rooms, it is open to a page where Mrs. Piozzi, angered by Boswell’s contradiction of her own book, has written in the margin: “Mme. Piozzi thought & knew that she was telling truth.”

In such a charged and inquisitive atmosphere, people were eager for Johnsonian relics. “From the beginning,” Mary Hyde wrote, “Johnson manuscripts have been the subject of cupidity, curiosity, and study. ‘It is wonderful,’ Boswell wrote...in 1788, ‘what avidity there still is for everything relative to Johnson.’” That avidity has only grown with the years, as Johnson’s writings and personality have continued to win new generations of admirers. Boswell, whose love for Johnson was boundless, would not have been surprised by that. But even he could not have predicted that, 200 years later, any pilgrims in search of Samuel Johnson would have to make their way, not to Lichfield or London, but to Harvard Yard.

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