

## IX

In 1881, Daniel McFarland, Spooner's friend, wrote how "painfully sorrowful and maddening, Lysander, to reflect that you, who have worked so hard and given so much valuable thought to the world, have been kept in poverty. . . ." <sup>1</sup> From earliest youth to his very death, Spooner dreamt of success; but always he lived nearly destitute. His law practice, speculation in Ohio lands, the post office venture, the many books and pamphlets, the patents, the landbank, the copyright company, and his other efforts, each left Spooner as poor as when he began.

Except while living in his father's home in Athol, Spooner lived in a boarding house situated in Boston within a few blocks of the Boston Athenaeum. His existence was indeed spare. In *Poverty* (1846), Spooner scorned luxuries and frivolity; clearly he enjoyed none. His ideal was the simple life. "Purity," he wrote, "dwells with moderate competence, with the simple board, with the modest garb, and with cheerful industry." Yet he deplored the "toil, oppression, insult, neglect, and loneliness" which continually led the young "to fall sacrifices to . . . the enticements of the libertines." (*Poverty*, p. 50) Spooner escaped such snares; but he never entirely escaped the "toil, oppression, insult, neglect, and loneliness" that are the common heritage of poor people.

Poverty aggravated Spooner's already flinty disposition. He was gruff, direct, and impatient with any hypocrisy. His correspondence includes cantankerous and not entirely creditable disputes with friends who failed to understand him. Gerrit Smith was a friend of long standing; the association was never entirely harmonious, and after more than two decades of close association, Spooner told Smith to return all his letters and never to write again. Smith replied November 6, 1863, "Your letter came last evening finding me in poor health. It kept me awake nearly all the night.

<sup>1</sup> Daniel McFarland to Lysander Spooner, August 10, 1881. Spooner Papers, New York Historical Society.

How shall I account for such a letter? I supposed that you numbered me amongst your truest friends.”<sup>2</sup>

Poverty, however, cannot explain all of Spooner’s dour and grouchy traits. Much of his disposition can be traced to family and regional folkways. His younger brother, William Brown Spooner (1809–1880), shared many of Lysander’s attitudes. Although nominated for mayor of Boston and for Congress, William refused ever to run, saying, “I have been quite actively interested in public matters, but have generally preferred my private independence to public positions, which are too often obtained by sacrifice of one’s personal self-respect.”<sup>3</sup> William Spooner finally entered politics only to ensure enactment of prohibition in Massachusetts, and he resolutely scorned fame and publicity. Interestingly, there is no record of contact between the brothers who both lived in Boston.

Spooner’s friends were few, but those few recognized his integrity and remained loyal. George Bradburn, for instance, came to know him in the 1840’s. Their association continued until Bradburn’s death in 1879. Spooner’s long correspondence (approximately one hundred letters survive) with Bradburn provides considerable detail concerning his personal life – particularly his friendship with the families of Dr. George Hoyt and Richard Hildreth.<sup>4</sup> In these letters, Spooner on occasion shows his stoic compassion. After the Hildreths lost their youngest child, Spooner wrote “He was a most lovely child in disposition, always happy, always playful always affectionate. They have a beautiful daguerreotype of him. . . . He was taken to Deerfield to be buried.”<sup>5</sup> When Bradburn died, Spooner consoled Frances Bradburn, served as a pallbearer, and wrote a memorial for the *Boston Transcript*.<sup>6</sup>

In an age which virtually invented “romance,” Spooner found love difficult. Lacking any taste for sentimentality, he saw marriage as a legal contract without the emotional overtones of romance; in *Considerations for Bankers* (1864), Spooner asked, “If a handsome and spirited young man has promised marriage with a young and beautiful woman, have Congress power to enact that he may tender a decrepit old man in his stead?” (p. 47)

Beyond being a legal contract – sacred in the same way any legal contract

<sup>2</sup> Gerrit Smith to Lysander Spooner, November 6, 1863. Spooner Papers, New York Historical Society.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Spooner, *Records of William Spooner of Plymouth, Mass. and his Descendant* (Cincinnati, 1883), I, 588.

<sup>4</sup> George Hoyt, a lawyer from Athol, in 1859 at the age of 21, was sent to Charleston, West Virginia, as counsel for John Brown. See Villard, *John Brown* (Boston, 1910), p. 484. Most probably he was the son of Dr. George Hoyt, Spooner’s doctor and friend.

<sup>5</sup> Lysander Spooner to George Bradburn, April 15, 1853. Spooner Papers, New York Historical Society.

<sup>6</sup> Frances Bradburn, *Memorial of George Bradburn* (Boston, 1883), 245f.

would be—marriage also provided a defense against “lewdness.” (Lady’s novels, following Richardson’s *Pamela*, despite their tears and sighs, say the same thing.) Spooner claimed his banking system would end licentiousness “by making marriage nearly universal, and by inducing it in early life.” Poverty prevented many marriages and created a large pool of unmarried persons; in New England this was especially true, because so many men had moved West. With economic handicaps removed, no one would need to remain single, and with everyone married—the “desire of matrimony” is “strong and universal”—all temptation would be removed. The principal source of “libertinism” (both among married and single men and women) was “the unnatural and solitary state of large numbers of both sexes.” (*Poverty*, pp. 51–52)

Understandably, Lysander Spooner’s courting was no more successful than his other ventures. He was friendly with Mrs. Elizabeth Sargent during the 1840’s. George Bradburn wrote Spooner of his first meeting with Mrs. Sargent and her “better half”: “Were she a Miss, I’m not sure but she’d soon be unmissed by you. . . .” A year later Bradburn wrote consoling Spooner because he had not been able to see Mrs. Sargent. “Ah, I suspect her worse half does not care to have her where you are! ’Twas bad policy, babbling your notions of divorce in his hearing!”<sup>7</sup> Spooner’s view of the contractual nature of marriage led him to stress the rights of women, which included divorce. Each woman, he argued, has a “natural, inherent, inalienable right, as a human being, to direct her own labor, control her own earnings, make her own contracts, and provide for the subsistence of herself and her children.” (*Letter to Cleveland*, p. 65)

Mrs. Sargent eventually separated from her husband and established herself independently in Boston. She was a woman of accomplishment; some of her writings were published, and she supported herself by pencil sketches and portraits. A bohemian by standards of the 1840’s, her reputation worried Spooner. From the farm in Athol, he wrote to George Bradburn—“. . . has she done anything for which her *friends* in Boston blame her? We hear some stories here, which do not sound like truth, when spoken of her—and we are anxious to hear the other side of the story.”<sup>8</sup> To assuage his qualms, Mrs. Sargent moved for a time to the Athol area, to be near him. Eventually she obtained a divorce, but by then her affections for Spooner had cooled and she married a mutual acquaintance, William Brackett.

During the 1850’s, Spooner underwent a far more traumatic love experi-

<sup>7</sup> George Bradburn to Lysander Spooner, October 26, 1845; April 23, 1846. Spooner Papers, New York Historical Society.

<sup>8</sup> Lysander Spooner to George Bradburn, April 3, 1846. Spooner Papers, New York Historical Society.

ence. He engaged to marry a teacher, Mary Booth — “quite an attractive person; graceful, & intellectual, with grand blue eyes, & a spiritual face.” They were to be married as soon as Spooner had saved enough money to buy a house. In 1855, Miss Booth grew impatient and cut off the engagement, saying she had to return home to care for her mother. A mutual friend wrote Spooner that Mary had found him important only as “the means of giving her a home,” and that she “was something of a coquette, willing enough to hold on to S[pooner] until she should be offered a man who could house her . . .”<sup>9</sup> After their break in 1855, Spooner could not bring himself to write Mary Booth for two years. In a long and painful letter, he then wrote: “The idea that, after I had loved you devotedly for years and after you had professed so much love for me, you should suddenly refuse to write me . . . seemed to me very heartless and indeed very insulting.”<sup>10</sup>

The break with Mary Booth coincided with Spooner’s work on *The Law of Intellectual Property* (1855), which was never completed or published. Spooner went into a depression and developed trouble with his leg, which forced him to use crutches. After two bad years, he wrote Mary that, “. . . during the last year my health was very poor — so poor at times that Dr. Hoyt thought it was going to fail altogether, and that I should not live long.” The doctor called for complete rest from writing, declaring that Spooner was suffering from “too much mental labor and excitement.”<sup>11</sup>

In these grim years Spooner turned from writing to making inner-spring beds and chairs. After he was able once more to write to Mary Booth, and after the Dred Scott decision, in 1857, Spooner resumed his researches and his writing. He told Mary she was “heartless” and “insulting.” To the Supreme Court’s decision that black people never could be citizens, he responded with his “Plan for the Abolition of Slavery” (1858), calling for immediate raids on slaveholders and the overthrow of established governments. Following his unhappy courtship of Mary Booth, Spooner shows considerably less sympathy for the existing social system, and a stronger emphasis upon revolution. His judgment that society was neither decent nor just was reenforced by his failure to find happiness in that society.

Spoooner never entirely gave up on prospects for courtship and marriage; his papers contain letters from Lizzie Doten, a medium, in the 1860’s; and

<sup>9</sup> George Bradburn to Lysander Spooner, September 14, 1857. Spooner Papers, New York Historical Society.

<sup>10</sup> Lysander Spooner to Mary [Booth], n.d. Spooner Papers, Boston Public Library. This is a draft of a letter or perhaps several letters; on the basis of letters to and from George Bradburn, Mary’s last name can be provided and the date fixed sometime in 1857 for the Boston Public Library letter(s).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

from Virginia Vaughn, a lecturer on poetry, in the 1870's.<sup>12</sup> But he seems to have slipped into the life of a bachelor with relative ease and comfort.

Having passed his fortieth birthday in 1858, he settled — to use his own words — into the role of “author, philosopher, reformer, and oracle.” In the obituary written for *Liberty*, Benjamin Tucker described Spooner as “Our Nestor Taken From Us”:

“On any day except Sunday, for as many years back as the present writer can remember, a visitor at the Boston Athenaeum Library between the hours of nine and three might have noticed, as nearly all did notice, in one of the alcoves overlooking Tremont Street across the Old Granary burying-ground, the stooping figure of an aged man, bending over a desk piled high with dusty volumes of history, jurisprudence, political science, and constitutional law, and busily absorbed in studying and writing. Had the old man chanced to raise his head for a moment, the visitor would have seen, framed in long and snowy hair and beard, one of the finest, kindest, sweetest, strongest, grandest faces that ever gladdened the eyes of man.”<sup>13</sup>

In his last years, Spooner represented the ripened seed of wisdom; he was the seer among those he knew, a mastercraftsman of the intellect.

With his long white hair and beard, Lysander Spooner filled this majestic role for nearly thirty years. He went regularly to the Athenaeum from his nearby room until just a few weeks before his death. Nearly eighty years old, he seemed ageless, unchanged and unchangeable. As symptoms of his physical failure surrounded him, he now was “bitterly hostile to all schools of medicine,” and finally saw a doctor only three days before dying. Tucker notes that “with a firmness always characteristic of his life, he declined to describe his symptoms or to accept either advice or medicine.” The Boston *Globe* described him “gradually sinking under the combined influence of rheumatism and bilious fever.” Benjamin Tucker evidently was at his side as he sank into unconsciousness:

“He died at one o'clock in the afternoon of Saturday, May 14, [1887], in his little room at 109 Myrtle Street, surrounded by trunks and chests bursting with the books, manuscripts, and pamphlets which he had gathered about him in his active pamphleteer's warfare over half a century ago.”<sup>14</sup>

Boston anarchists gathered for the funeral and saw Spooner decently buried in Forest Hills Cemetery. They saved their larger tribute for a memorial meeting on Sunday, May 29, 1887, in Wells Hall — lecturing place of spiritualists, phrenologists, reformers, and other unorthodox speakers. A table with all of Spooner's available writings for sale was set up.

<sup>12</sup> Virginia Vaughn to Lysander Spooner, April 8, 1872, March 22, 1886; Lizzie Doten to Lysander Spooner, February 24, 1860. Spooner Papers, Boston Public Library.

<sup>13</sup> *Liberty*, May 28, 1887.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, Boston *Globe*, May 15, 1887.

Theodore D. Weld and George W. Searle spoke on behalf of Spooner's abolitionist efforts. Henry Appleton and J. M. L. Babcock praised his economic writings. Others praised the anarchist works. A letter was read from Victor Drury, Knights of Labor leader in New York City; Drury noted that Spooner was the last to die in the trio of old friends which had included Edward Linton and Josiah Warren. Finally, being a movement meeting, they passed four resolutions commemorating Spooner's work. The last one read:

*"Resolved:* That, while he fought this good fight and kept the faith, he did not finish his course, for his goal was in the eternities; that, starting in his youth in pursuit of truth, he kept it up through a vigorous manhood, undeterred by poverty, neglect, or scorn, and in his later life relaxed his energies not one jot; that his mental vigor seemed to grow as his physical powers declined; that although, counting his age by years, he was an octogenarian, we chiefly mourn his death, not as that of an old man who has completed his task, but as that of the youngest man among us, — youngest because, after all that he had done, he still had so much service that the best we can do his memory is to take up his work where he was forced to drop it, carry it on with all that we can summon of his energy and indomitable will, and as old age creeps upon us, not lay the harness off, but following his example and Emerson's advice, 'obey the voice at eve obeyed at prime.'" <sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> *Liberty*, June 18, 1887.