The Poor Man and the Lady

Until his twenty-third year Thomas Hardy’s experience had scarcely extended beyond the borders of his native Dorset. He was born, on June 2, 1840, in the hamlet of Upper Bockhampton; he went to school in the nearby county town of Dorchester; in 1856 he was articled to the Dorchester architect, John Hicks, specialist in the restoration of Gothic churches. Although during the later years of his pupilage Hardy took lodgings in Dorchester, returning to Bockhampton only at weekends, he had earlier continued to live at home, walking to and fro each day between “a county-town of assizes and aldermen, which had advanced to railways and telegraphs and daily London papers,” and “a world of shepherds and ploughmen in a hamlet three miles off, where modern improvements were still regarded as wonders”.1 If the years with Hicks thus gave him an unusual opportunity of seeing “rustic and borough doings in a juxtaposition peculiarly close”, they also enlarged his knowledge of the neighbouring countryside, into which he would often be sent to inspect churches on which restoration work was contemplated or actually in progress.

After the expiration of his articles, Hardy left Dorset for London and a job as an architectural assistant in the Adelphi office of Arthur (later Sir Arthur) Blomfield, the move no doubt recommending itself as an opportunity to further not only the career to which he had become committed through economic necessity (and his own talents with a pencil) but also his more private ambitions as a poet. Once arrived, he was immediately and profoundly fascinated by a city that, in April 1862, was still very much the London evoked by Dickens and Mayhew; he was

---

M. Millgate, *Thomas Hardy* © Michael Millgate 1994
no less excited by such specifically modern phenomena as the Great Exhibition of 1862, and by that tremendous mid-Victorian thrust of urban development and expansion which he was, as an architect working in the heart of the capital, in an unrivalled position to observe.

It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that on March 18, 1865, Hardy should have initiated his career as a published writer of fiction with the appearance, in Chambers's Journal, of a lightly satirical piece on the current building boom. Yet "How I Built Myself a House" nonetheless constitutes a disturbingly uncharacteristic debut, as its first sentence may sufficiently suggest: "My wife Sophia, myself, and the beginning of a happy line, formerly lived in the suburbs of London, in the sort of house called a Highly-Desirable Semi-detached Villa".\(^2\) In almost every respect—the satirical archness, the use of a dramatised first-person point of view, the adoption of a specifically urban and middle-class persona—the sketch seems wholly out of key with Hardy's later work. It displays, like some of the early poems for which he had failed to find a publisher, a young writer searching for an effective method of literary processing, a means of transforming autobiography into art, and heralds the adoption of a similar formula two or three years later in his first—and unpublished—novel, The Poor Man and the Lady, "A Story with no Plot" narrated "By the Poor Man".\(^3\)

The "Poor Man" persona allowed Hardy to draw much more immediately than in "How I Built Myself a House" upon his own experience, especially insofar as it had involved the juxtaposition of contrasted social worlds. From what is known of the lost manuscript of The Poor Man and the Lady, it also seems clear that the rhetoric of social criticism with which he sought to propel his autobiographical material into the stuff of fiction now became altogether more sweeping in scope and more assertive in tone. Certainly the letter submitting the novel to the firm of Macmillan on July 25, 1868, suggests an ambition whose direction may have been altered but whose confidence had in no way been diminished by the decision of the young author to become, at least temporarily, a novelist rather than a poet. In writing the novel,