Therein consists the alternative between positing and external reflection: do people create the world they live in from within themselves, autonomously, or does their activity result from external circumstances?

Slavoj Žižek, ‘From “In-itself” to “For-itself” ’

In entering the Novel, we break the umbilical cord, we are cast into a birth, which is repeated as rebirth or new birth at one or more intervals along the way. We begin by gazing at facades and interfaces, noting the combining of wet and dry. As we progress, we come upon mud and slime, marshy passages of possibility. Renewed contact with the earth and all its dirt is here sacred to us and to our purposes.

Margaret Doody, The True Story of the Novel

He was released without any reproach to himself, from an entanglement which had long formed his misery, from a woman whom he had long ceased to love; – and elevated at once to that security with another, which he must have thought of almost with despair, as soon as he had learnt to consider it with desire. He was brought, not from doubt or suspense, but from misery to happiness.

Jane Austen, Sense and Sensibility

Sense and Sensibility draws to our attention a strong narrative tension between the empirical odds stacked against the possibility of a ‘happy ending’ (characteristic of realism), and the realisation of this ending nonetheless (characteristic of romance). The discrete happiness of the entwined double plots emphasises a dialectical ‘conversion’ of the two
sisters. The hitherto ‘romantic’ Marianne’s final happiness is quiet, slow-burning, and discrete: ‘her joy, though sincere as her love for her sister, was of a kind to give neither spirits nor language.’ The hitherto ‘cool’ Elinor’s is passionate and extreme: ‘she found every doubt, every solici-tude removed, compared her situation with what so lately it had been ... she was overcome by her own felicity; – and happily disposed as is the human mind to be easily familiarized with any change for the better, it required several hours to give sedateness to her spirits, or any degree of tranquillity to her heart’.198

Structuralist literary analysis, by reproducing the final determinant of an abstract ‘mode of production’, addresses the problem of structure and agency at the level of literary narrative. The homology forwarded by Barthes, between the sentence as ‘the smallest segment that is perfectly and wholly representative of discourse’, and ‘discourse’ itself as ‘the message of another language, one operating at a higher level than the language of the linguists’ is intuited through ‘the purely formal nature of the correspondences’: ‘insofar as it is likely that a similar formal organization orders all semiotic systems, whatever their substances and dimensions’.199 In this approach, an individual narrative, such as Sense and Sensibility, ‘receives its final meaning from the fact that it is narrated, entrusted to a discourse which possesses its own code’.

Characters, as ‘subjects’ of the narrative (e.g. Elinor and Marianne Dashwood) can be seen to ‘yield to the sentence model’ of linguistics, so that ‘the actantial typology’ operates according to the ‘elementary functions of grammatical analysis’.200 The narrative work combines three ‘levels of description’, and ‘these three levels are bound together according to a mode of progressive integration’, receiving their ‘final meaning’ from the very fact of narration, which ‘intall[s] in us, all at once and in its entirety, the narrative code we are going to need’ to receive it properly.201 Narrative is ‘isotropic’, completing itself along a vertical index with reference to a ‘unity of meaning’ which ‘impregnates’ both sign and context through ‘integration’; and distributional along a horizontal index, which coincides with the ‘realist illusion’ of chronology.202

The three levels of narrative structure are ‘Functions’, ‘Action’, and ‘Narration’. Functions are defined as ‘the seed’ which plants ‘an element that will come to fruition later’. ‘Cardinal’ functions are nuclei of sequences which refer to ‘a complementary and consequential act’, distinguished from ‘indices’ (referring to ‘a more or less diffuse concept which is nevertheless necessary to the meaning of the story’).203 Cardinal functions are primarily distributional, while indices are primarily integrational, since the ‘ratification of indices is “higher up.” Functions refer