I have already stated that 'autistic' characters do not exist, but characters may still be representative of 'autism', either because the reader attributes it to them, or the text directly alludes to it. Each portrayal then updates the reader's understanding of this concept. The consensuses of autism portrayals would signify such a concept. However, because this requires a discourse analysis, I will select a set of stereotypes in regard to which I will analyse the novels. The existence of stereotypical characteristics in autism portrayals would suggest a certain degree of stylisation, which might even point toward a literary type or stock character.

Before doing so, however, I wish to demonstrate how stereotypes affect our understanding of reality and subsequently our reading-process. I will then examine stereotypes associated with autism, before analysing eight novels regarding stereotypical portrayals.

Stereotypes and Knowledge

In his book *Public Opinion*[1], Walter Lippmann stated that "(f)or the most part we do not first see, and then define, we define first and then see." (Lippmann, Public Opinion, 81). Coinciding with the primacy effect, our expectations change our perception. However, Lippmann took this theory one step further, by coining the term 'stereotype' in the modern sense Because our surroundings are too complex, we consciously and unconsciously engage in stereotyping to reduce our environment and especially human beings into patterns, since "we are not equipped to deal with so much subtlety, so much variety" (Lippmann 11). Consequently, stereotypes are everywhere; "public or private, negative or positive, favorable or unfavorable in regard to any person, place, or thing" (McIlrath 2–3). They can be considered automatic responses and thus "nothing more unusual and dangerous than common-sense judgment" (McIlrath 3). On the other hand, stereotypes are mostly discussed when applied to groups or classes of people. As such, they are not only primarily negative but usually seen as untrustworthy (Amossy and Heidingsfeld 690) and

1 I am returning to the concept of 'public opinions' in Chapter 4.1.

compared to prejudices. In such cases, stereotypes may mislead us and cause us to arrive at a false conclusion, with the pitfall that we do not typically "become aware that we have made these demands or aware of what they are until an active question arises as to whether or not they will be fulfilled" (Goffman 10). Due to the confirmation bias, we also tend to cling to our preconceived opinions and will not question these stereotypes until we cannot deny their incompatibility with the incoming information.

I previously stated that readers interpret characters according to their own knowledge, which in turn is organised in concepts. I now suggest that stereotypes are condensed concepts. As such, they will never be completely accurate, since they carry reduced information. Sometimes, stereotypes might more or less equal the whole knowledge a person holds on a certain topic.[2] In this case, a person cannot come to an informed opinion but will necessarily rely on their stereotypes. Unfortunately, stereotypes are also often linked to an emotional response since they usually "gather around strongly disliked attitudes" (McIlrath 3). Thus, the inability to make an informed opinion tends to coincide with strong (negative) emotions. Again, not all stereotypes are false, but they also do not usually equal knowledge; and knowledge does not equal truth.

Michel Foucault's concept of knowledge and power is certainly one of the most prominent discourse theories. Reality is set within the borders of the discourse, i.e. the ineffable, and its centre, where it is turning around the notion of truth (Foucault 55–56). Consequently, "discourses determine reality, always of course via intervening active subjects in their societal contexts as (co-)producers and (co-)agents of discourse" (Wodak and Meyer 36). For Foucault, a discourse is "a limited number of statements for which a group of conditions can be defined" (Merk-Carinci 10). These conditions are generated by society itself so that "the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed by a certain number of procedures" (Foucault 52). As such, some statements will stay within the discourse while others will be

2 I cannot speak of prejudice, however, for it may be accurate even if starkly limited.

eliminated (Merk-Carinci 10). Consequently, discourses are socially, and by extension culturally, bound. According to Jäger and Zimmermann, all statements belonging to one discourse are thus within a 'Sagbarkeitsfeld' (field of sayability), which at the same time represents "the totality of statements considered to be true by society at a certain point in time" (10, own translation)[3]. Thus, discourses are anchored both in time and space.

I suggest that stereotypes are lodged between our perception and knowledge, as they are "a psychical-physical function, a gestalt, which motivates semiautomatic, noncognitive behavior toward the object in life" (McIlrath 3). This contrasts with 'knowledge' in the sense of an informed opinion. Not only is our perception usually tainted by what we want or expect to see, but we also tend to take a shortcut when it comes to classifying it. As such, stereotypes are always somewhat subjective, although they may become public in the same sense that signifiers are consensually used within societies. In this case, they tend to become conscious.

> We see, therefore, that people recognize and name stereotypes only when they become public instead of private, and usually not until the direction is unfavorable rather than favorable. (McIlrath 3)

Yet, only when a stereotype becomes conscious are we able to counteract it by changing our automatic responses to reality. Furthermore, one must assume that different groups hold different stereotypes of the same topic. For example, psychologists will hold different stereotypes (in the sense of abbreviated concepts and semi-automated reactions) towards autism than an autistic person. However, both can be considered experts who utilise their knowledge to update their stereotypes, whereas a layperson's knowledge of autism is naturally limited, perhaps even to the point where it cannot possibly counteract any stereotypes.

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3 "alle zulässigen Äußerungen, die zu einem Zeitpunkt in einer Gesellschaft zirkulieren" (Merk-Carinci 10) *Note from author:* For better readability I have provided in-text translations and original quotes in the footnotes.

Furthermore, these stereotypes might encompass most or all knowledge a person holds on this topic. Although Hacking argues that today most people have at least *some* understanding of autism ("Humans, Aliens & Autism" 46), their conception might be false or merely stereotypical. If so, a person is prone to overestimating their knowledge in this particular area. In other words, because they lack further knowledge, they cannot critically apprehend their stereotypes, which may even turn out to be prejudiced if false. This, of course, also applies to novels.

Stereotypes in Reading

I assume that literature is more than aesthetics or a cultural by-product, even more than knowledge made accessible to the subject. According to Pierre Legendre, literature is essential to the production and reproduction of our existence (Becker 180), since, as he theorises, it is Lacan's metaphorical mirror in our culture and thus the constitutive momentum for both, the subject and culture itself (174). Consequently, the subject is – at least in parts – institutionalised through literature (173). Unsurprisingly, then, society's understanding of reality is reflected in literature, which happens to include stereotypes. Thus, not only will authors more or less overtly encode stereotypes into their novels, but readers generally rely on their real-world knowledge to decipher fictional characters. Again, stereotypes are not necessarily negative. According to Hochman, we commonly typify people in real life, i.e. we categorise them according to our established (cultural and individual) stereotypes (46–47). By doing so, we do not necessarily strip them of their individuality; rather, we remain aware of them being individuals while also classifying them (122–23), so as to easily make assumptions about them. Although this process sounds condescending, this automatism helps us to quickly predict the actions and reactions of others. As mentioned above, stereotypes are both private and public, thus I will assume that culturally bound stereotypes exist within the collective memory. Hence, it is not surprising that readers also apply stereotypes in the process of understanding a novel (Auracher and Hi-