

# INTRODUCTION

*The Adventures of Tintin* has been translated into some sixty languages, with more than 200 million copies sold to date. There is no doubt that Hergé's work is of compelling interest. Philosopher Michel Serres, for example, sees it as a twentieth-century classic, an enduring masterpiece. On the occasion of Hergé's death, Serres confided to a journalist that "no other French author can be compared to him in influence and reputation."<sup>1</sup> To be sure, Hergé also has vehement detractors. Several years ago a critic of Tintin wrote, "This hypocrite, this boy feigning innocence, this ugly little monkey cannot fool us any longer. It's time we exposed him for what he really is. Tintin is a forty-year-old dwarf, a colonialist, and a zoophile, with homosexual tendencies to boot. This is the despicable character we set up as a hero for our dear little children."<sup>2</sup>

The accusations leveled at Hergé are many but almost always play on the same themes. His hero is accused of misogyny: indeed, women are almost totally absent from his work—along with workers and Catholics. Moreover, he is suspected of promoting a right-wing ideology, of being a colonialist, racist, and anti-Semite. In most of his interviews, Hergé had to respond to these accusations, and his defense varied little from one interview to the next. Thus, one can summarize it as follows. Tintin was born at the end of the 1920s, when his author, who had grown up in a right-wing, Catholic environment, was only twenty-two years old. The first two albums are witness to "the sins of his youth," subsequently disavowed. The first, which smacks of an elementary anticommunism, was republished only much later

and only as an archival document. The other represents a colonialist ideology of the 1930s. If the hero bears a certain paternalistic attitude toward the blacks, he is not really racist because we see that he actually defends them against the wicked whites. Later on, Tintin consistently takes the side of the underdog, and we see him coming to the rescue of Native Americans as well as oppressed Chinese. As for the accusation of anti-Semitism, even if Hergé admits to having presented “a disagreeable businessman with Jewish features and a Jewish name,” still he pleads innocent: “Who could have foreseen that Jewish stories would end in the way we know they did, that is, in the death camps of Treblinka and Auschwitz?”<sup>3</sup>

That one can appreciate Hergé’s work and the ideology it promotes is due at least in part to the author’s managing to cloud the issue by getting us to forget his hero’s origin. Tintin is a character without a past. Hergé was constantly touching up his work for more than fifty years, not only to improve the graphics but also to eliminate whatever aspects appeared anachronistic, poorly executed, or too caught up in an ideology he no longer espoused. Just as in George Orwell’s *1984*, where old newspapers are rewritten so that the present seems to flow seamlessly from the past, so too Hergé recast his work to form a whole, to escape history and thus be able to transform itself into myth.

The first albums consisted of three versions. From 1930 on, the first series, often inaccessible, was produced from day to day and appeared in daily or weekly newspapers. The second already differed from the first, even though it was published in the same year as an album in black and white. In 1941 the albums were published in color with a format of sixty-two pages. The third version consists of albums reappearing after 1949, when the success of Tintin reached such unprecedented levels that Hergé was able to capitalize on it by recirculating the first adventures. One’s critical appreciation of Hergé’s work varies according to which version one has in mind. Hergé himself does not make it any easier for his critics. On the one hand, he does not endorse any particular interpretation of his work;<sup>4</sup> on the other, he never clarifies to which version he is referring. Thus, the Tintin from before the war gets credited with a liberalism acquired only later.

There are two ways of studying the adventures of Hergé’s hero. The first is diachronic: It consists in following the stories in their order of appearance and situating them in the concrete context in which they appeared. From this point of view, the first versions, partially reedited in the collection *The*

*Archives of Hergé*, are of particular interest.<sup>5</sup> The second method is synchronistic: It consists in taking the adventures as a whole in order to examine the internal development of this fictional universe, as coherent and self-enclosed as the world of Honoré de Balzac. In this case, it is better to analyze the most recent versions since they more readily exhibit Hergé's overall vision for his work, which he continued refining until the end. Depending on which point of view one chooses, one ends up with a different evaluation of Tintin.

What interests me here is to bring these two methods together to study both the genesis of the work and the metamorphoses of its hero. These metamorphoses are of various kinds. As external to the text, they depend on the ideological changes and disavowals of the author. As internal to the text, they have to do with the development of the stories as a whole, the aging of the characters, and the establishment of their interpersonal relationships. On another more immediate level, the metamorphoses of Tintin are equally about their author's knack for dissimulation to dodge his enemies. Bringing these two approaches together may allow for a more adequate appreciation of the role of Tintin in contemporary culture.