Alongside all the solemnity that frames Lindbergh’s flight across the Atlantic, we may allow ourselves the arabesque of a joke—the amusing pendant to the regrettable frivolity with which the Paris evening papers prematurely announced the triumph of Nungesser and Coli. The same papers are now exposed for the second time. They owe this to an idea conceived by a student at the Ecole Normale—an idea that Karl Kraus might envy. As is well known, this Ecole Normale is the celebrated French state school that every year admits only an elite group of applicants, after the stiffest entrance examinations. On the afternoon of the first day Charles Lindbergh spent in Paris, someone telephoned all the newspaper editors with the news that the Ecole Normale had resolved to declare the aviator “a former student.” And all the papers printed the announcement. Among the medieval Scholastics, there was a school that described God’s omnipotence by saying: He could alter even the past, unmake what had really happened, and make real what had never happened. As we can see, in the case of enlightened newspaper editors, God is not needed for this task; a bureaucrat is all that is required.

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Notes

1. François Coli (1881–1927) and Charles Nungesser (1892–1927) were French aviators whose plane, L’Oiseau Blanc, disappeared over the North Atlantic during their attempt to fly nonstop from New York to Paris.