Longinus’s short treatise, once called a “small golden book” by the famous French philologist Isaac Casaubon, was transmitted only fragmentarily. It had a greater influence on aesthetics than any other theoretical text during the early modern period. Since the first edition of the Greek text (by Francesco Robortello in 1554), the treatise had been understood as a scholarly piece on the grand style, clearly situated within the context of the theory of the rhetorical *genera dicendi*, the three canons of style. The potential of *Peri hypsous* to break these norms was not discovered until the end of the 17th century. Nicolas Boileau’s French translation, published in 1674 together with his influential *Art poétique*, played a decisive role in this process. He was among the first to recognize that Longinus’s category of *hypsos* was not identical to the grand style of the three *genera dicendi*, which is also mirrored in the title he gave his translation: *Traité du sublime* (previous editions had always referred to the grand style in their titles).

While Boileau’s predecessors had most frequently translated the Greek word *hypsos* with reference to the rhetorical *genus grande*, Boileau used the Latin word *sublimitas*. This was still a relatively fresh term and not frequently used in Latin rhetorical terminology. In the preface to his translation, Boileau describes the effect of the sublime *hypsos* as ‘not a style, and
by no means identical to what the ancient rhetoricians called the grand style (le stile sublime). The sublime should rather be understood as the extraordinary, the delightful properties of a speech that carry the audience away.\textsuperscript{5}

In his preface Boileau thus carefully distinguishes the rhetorical ‘grand style’ from the sublime (hypsos) in Longinus’s sense. For Boileau, the chief theorist of the French classical period, rhetorical grand style and the sublime were clearly opposed to each other. The grand style, he writes, always aims at the use of ‘great words’, but one could find the hypsos-sublime in one single thought or one single rhetorical figure. It is not a style in terms of a style “level” or style “register”, but rather a momentary effect that appears unexpectedly and surprises the audience.\textsuperscript{6} Longinus himself compares hypsos to a lightning that, like the passion of the orator, flashes up suddenly. A matter could be sublime, he continues, with regard to the style in use (the rhetorical norms of the genera dicendi-theory), and still not meet the criteria of the sublime in Longinus’s concept of the hypsos, because it has no extraordinary and surprising effect on the audience.

It is crucial for my argument that Boileau refers to a theological example in his discussion of le sublime. This is surprising for a treatise that is often considered as the origin of a modern, ‘secular’ aesthetics. The example is from the beginning of the Genesis (Gen. 1,1), where the world is created through God’s speech. Boileau contrasts two stylistically different accounts of the same Act of Creation to make his point clear and show the difference between the grand style and the sublime: “The Almighty who rules over the earth creates light through one single sentence.” According to Boileau, this phrase is written in grand style, but it is not sublime in the true – i.e. Longinian – sense of the word. Compare the second example: “God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light.”\textsuperscript{7} According to Boileau, this phrase is truly sublime; it is even divine. The extraordinary, the wonderful, the striking spark is fully achieved in this phrase.\textsuperscript{8}

Boileau, of course, does not invent here a new example of le sublime. He quotes this passage from the Bible, but at the same time he is also citing

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\textsuperscript{5} Boileau, \textit{Traité du sublime} 45.
\textsuperscript{7} Boileau, \textit{Réflexions critiques}, 170 (Réfl. X): ‘Dieu dit: que la lumière se fasse: et la lumière se fit.’
\textsuperscript{8} Boileau, \textit{Traité du sublime} 45–46.