

By Fanny Grosse (MA 2007)

Lettres et entretiens sur la danse ancienne, moderne, religieuse, et théâtrale, accompagnés d'une lithographie chorégraphique

Auguste Alexis Floreal Baron (1794-1862) is best known for having been one of the founding members of L'Université Libre in Brussels where he taught French history and modern literature. His history of dance, published in Paris in December 1824, was written in an unusual form since it appears in letters and in conversations, as the title suggests. Indeed, the first part of the book includes seven letters written between February and November 1822 from London and sent to an anonymous young Parisian to whom Baron gives the name "Sophie." The second part reports seven conversations between the author, Sophie, and two other dancers who appear under the names of ancient philosophers, Héraclite (Heraclitus) and Démocrite (Democritus). The explanation Baron gives for the shift from letters to recorded conversations is his return from London to Paris, where Sophie resides.

Insofar as he purports to write at the request of his friend Sophie to educate her about this history of dance, Baron encourages us to read his book as a lesson in art appreciation. Nevertheless, while Baron writes in a didactic hand, his book takes the form of many long quotations from earlier dance histories followed by his own scathing appraisals of these works and their logic. The content of his book is no less than a collection of judgments passed on authors such as Cahusac and Bonnet, and its form a pretext that allows Baron to expound his personal ideas about dance. Finally, it is worth noting that he also undermines his own authority insisting that he is neither a dancer nor a musician and that most of this time, he is merely translating what others have already said.

The copy owned by the library of the University of Utah is called *Lettres et entretiens sur la danse ancienne, moderne, religieuse, et théâtrale, accompagnés d'une lithographie chorégraphique* and is dated in December 1824. The eight libraries in United States and Canada that also possess a copy of the *Lettres* own a different edition published the following year under a different title:

Lettres à Sophie sur la danse, suivies d'entretiens sur les danses ancienne, moderne, religieuse, civile et théâtrale. It is this 1825 edition that the Library of Congress has digitized. Utah's 1824 edition appears, therefore, to be extremely rare.

Library of Congress link:

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/dihtml/dicatlg.html>

Short biography of Baron:

http://www.bib.ulb.ac.be/Cours-JPD/travaux_9798/nobels/baron.htm