

19th January 2024

Passions

"What is passion? It is surely the becoming of a person."

John Boorman, *Projections* (1992)

A few days ago, I referenced a poem by a Scottish poet from a bygone age, Dr John Armstrong, called *The Art of Preserving Health*. John Armstrong was born in 1709, in Castleton in the Scottish Borders, the son of a minister. Having gained an Edinburgh University medical degree in 1732 (the first student to graduate "with distinction") he set up a successful medical practice in London. His brother, George, incidentally, is described as "the father of modern paediatrics" and was the founder of the world's first hospital for the care of sick children. His tombstone in Castleton contains this tribute: "He gave his life for the children of the poor."

John Armstrong's poem, *The Art of Preserving Health*, is an epic work, runs to 2,064 lines in 135 pages, and is divided into four "books," entitled, "Air", "Diet", "Exercise" and "The Passions". Published in 1744, one reviewer of the day described it as "a somewhat unpromising subject for poetic treatment ... [but] gracefully and ingeniously handled." I was intrigued by the headings of the poem's four sections. Air (in the sense of freshness, the benefit of the countryside) along with diet and exercise, one would expect in any exegesis, poetic or otherwise, of a healthy lifestyle. But what of "The Passions"? Here's what he says in this section of his poem:

*There is, they say, (and I believe there is)
A spark within us of th' immortal fire,
That animates and moulds the grosser frame;
And when the body sinks, escapes to heaven,
Its native seat; and mixes with the Gods.*

This is not sexual passion, nor a passion for a cause or an artistic pursuit. This is about the soul, "th' immortal fire", the core of our being. While air, diet and exercise are about body and mind, here is a concern for the spiritual dimension of life. It's not about religion, or a particular creed. It's about the dimension of being that "animates and moulds the grosser frame", or, in John Boorman's terms, "surely the becoming of a person."

For life to be in balance, body, mind and spirit have *all* to be healthy. But I wonder, Dr Armstrong, if you *really* needed 2,064 lines to tell us that.

A prayer for today

Lord, let my passion be to become what you would have me be. Amen