



Andy Goldsworthy: Royal Botanic Gardens, Edinburgh

# DEATH AND THE DOMESTIC

Of flesh, blood and bones<sup>38</sup>

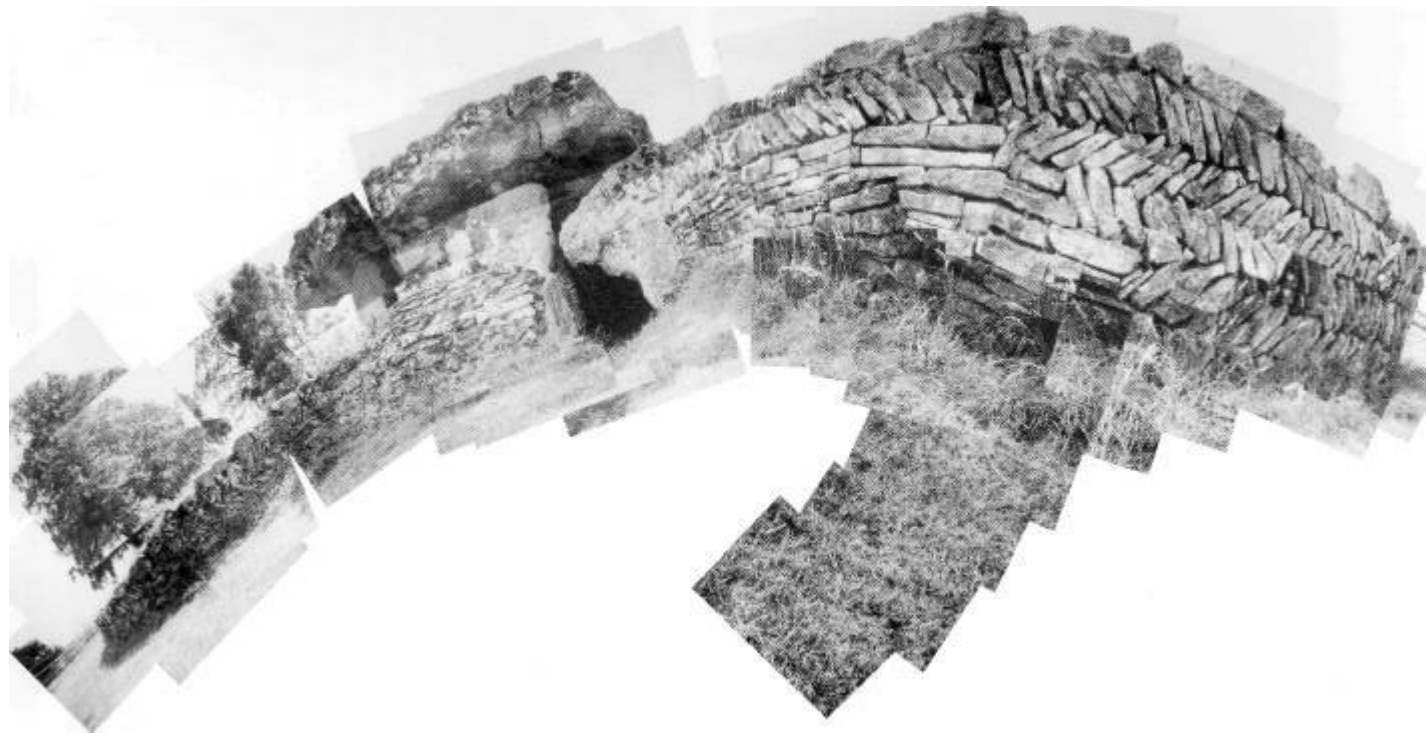
I tell you  
    all houses  
are holes in an arse of stone  
  
we eat off coffin lids  
  
between evening star  
    and milk in a bucket  
is nothing  
  
the churn is emptied  
    twice a day  
  
cast us  
    steaming  
    on the fields

(John Berger, 'Poem of Emigration: Village', 1984, p.57)

'I'll tell you what I did yesterday! I got the sexton, who was digging Linton's *'grave*, to remove the earth off her coffin lid, and I opened it. I thought, once, I would have stayed there, when I saw her face again - it is hers yet - he had hard work to stir me; but he said it would change, if the air blew on it, and so I struck one side of the coffin loose - and covered it up - not Linton's side, damn him! I wish he'd been soldered in lead - and I bribed the sexton to pull it away, when I'm laid there, and slide mine out too. I'll have it made so, and then, by the time Linton gets to us, he'll not know which is which!'

'You were very wicked, Mr Heathcliff !' I exclaimed; 'were you not ashamed to disturb the dead?'

'I disturbed nobody, Nelly,' he replied; 'and I gave some ease to



Tinkinswood, Glamorgan

myself. I shall be a great deal more comfortable now; and you'll have a better chance of keeping me underground, when I get there. . . .

'And if she had been dissolved into earth, or worse, what would you have dreamt of then?' I said.

'Of dissolving with her, and being more happy still!' he answered. 'Do you suppose that I dread any change of that sort?'

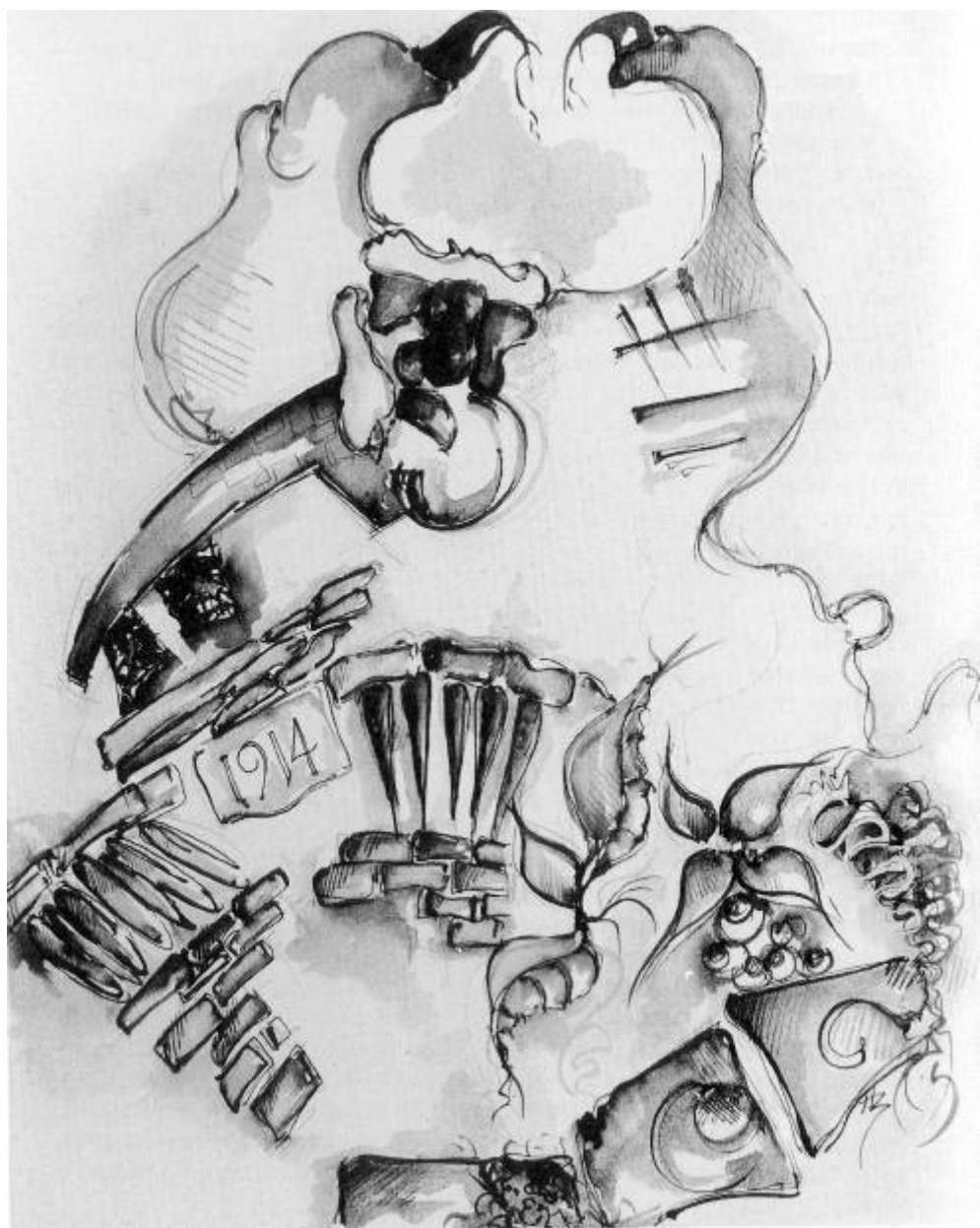
(Emily Bronte, *Wuthering Heights*, 1847, ch. 29)

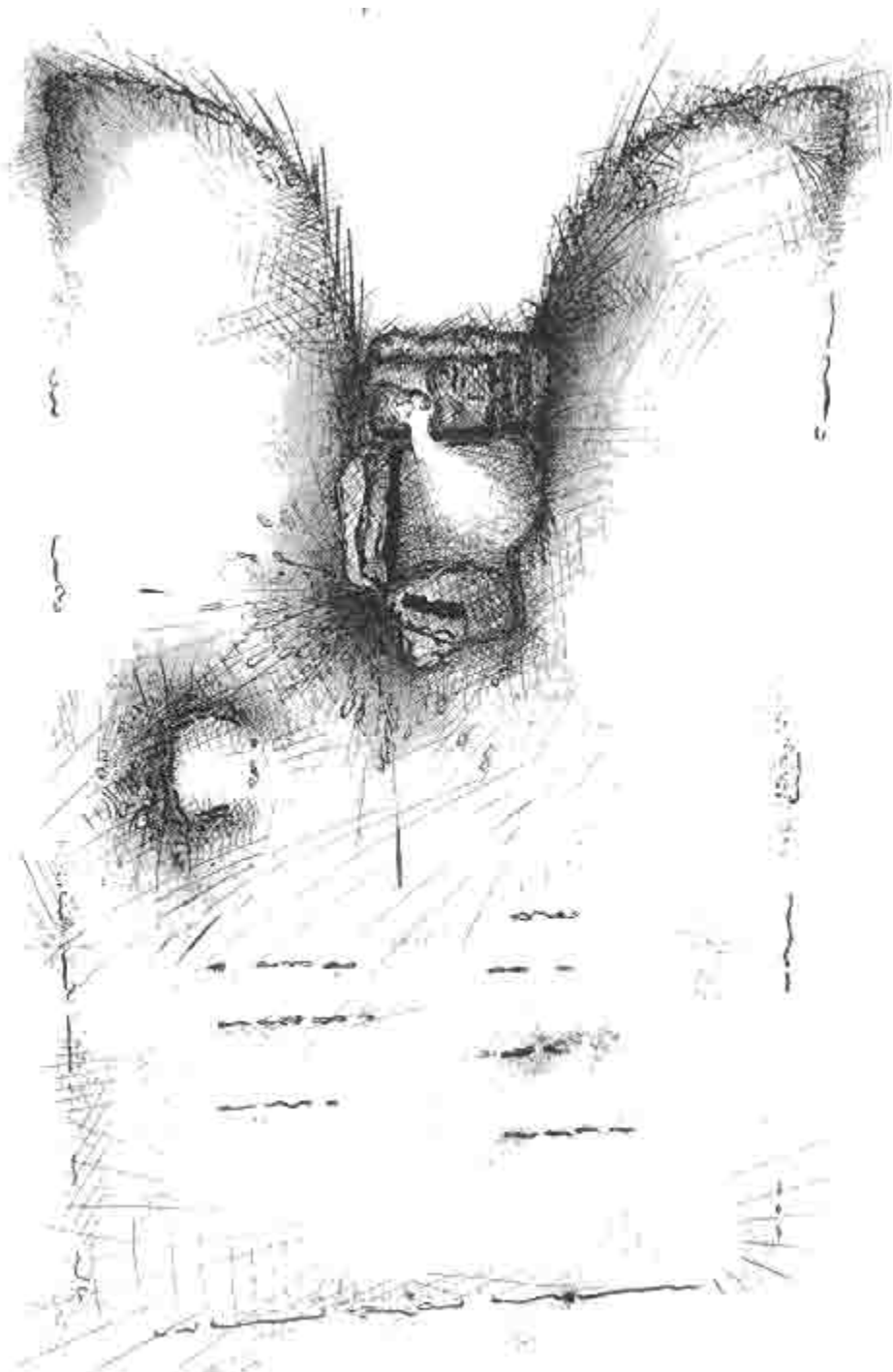
Not far to the west of Cardiff city, where we have our home, are two prehistoric . . . I hesitate to call them . . . tombs (the reason for my hesitation will become clear). Cromlechs (arched slabs of stone, in the Welsh); chambered long cairns. They are set in pasture, in rolling agricultural countryside. Maesyfelin or Gwal y Filiast (lair of the greyhound bitch - a name given to other cromlechs and a reference to the Welsh epic poem, the *Mabinogion*) is near the village of Saint Lythan's. It is a conspicuous mudstone chamber of slabs at the end of a long and low mound reaching out west. In the middle of its field on a rise; the cows have sheltered inside and the earth is bare and muddy in wet weather.

Not a mile down the road is another. Tinkinswood's great yellow capstone is perhaps some forty tons; pitching gently upwards it thickens to present itself sprinkled with lichens at a forecourt of curved drystone walling. This funnel-end of the stone-block cairn I meet first walking from the road across the cropped sheep field. A surrounding fence directs an approach from the south side of the cairn, not the front, past two ancient and associated standing stones, to see a brick pillar supporting the capstone and recording the excavation of 1914. They found the human and animal remains spewed out this ruined and now open side of the chamber; inside was a jumbled mass of bones, the disarticulated broken remains of more than fifty people. Originally the forecourt, like two limbs, gathered its visitors, to crouch down beneath curved arch-stone hole to get in through a short passage.

The cromlech was perhaps two thousand years old when, in times before the Romans, someone lost a gaming die in the chamber. And pottery attests to later visitors. In the cairn is a shallow stone-lined pit. Animal bones were found with it and human nearby. Not sepulchral, but perhaps a focus for eating, and afterwards. Some recent visitors seem to have used the pit for a picnic (or something more sinister?); there is a neat pile of ashes from a camp fire there now.

Maesyfelin and Tinkinswood are familiar. Unusual perhaps in aspects of their design, but there are many similar monuments scattered across the north and Atlantic seaboard of western Europe. They were made by early farmers, about whose settlements little is known in most areas. These megaliths - cromlechs, dolmens, chambers, circles, alignments - fascinate.





Long cairn Tinkinswood



Carlshogen, Scania, Sweden



Gillhog, Scania, Sweden: the chamber

Some of the chambers are intimate coffers; some, like Tinkinswood, are great constructions, many hold collections of disarticulated remains of people. Bodies may have been defleshed elsewhere, left out to decay, the member fragments gathered. Sometimes bodies were deliberately disturbed, having lain in the chambers. In the earthen long barrows of England there are signs that bones were moved between barrows and other sites; the bones may be shattered and bleached by the weather. Bones removed from tombs and perhaps circulated, replaced and ordered. These farmers were not making random collections of bones, but selecting and reordering their dead. In some tombs in Scania, Sweden they went for right or left sides of the body. In some tombs they distinguished between male and female. Sometimes, as at Ascott-under-Wychwood and at Fussell's Lodge in England, bones from more than one individual were brought together to make a semblance of an articulated skeleton again. Bones, particularly skulls and limbs, were arranged in patterns and orders. The individual broken and lost in the commingling.

The pit within the cairn at Tinkinswood (although its association with the chamber is uncertain) and fragments of pottery in the forecourt suggest other aspects to these sepulchral manipulations. At the entrance to many tombs in Sweden are found thousands of bits of smashed pottery (whose designs are distinctively different from those on pots found elsewhere). Animal bones, at many sites, may mean joints of meat. At Yorkshire barrows are traces of burnings. The court cairns of Ireland have areas in front of chamber entrances almost wholly enclosed. Courts, forecourts and facades stage a setting.

Gatherings, picnics, festivals, feasts, rituals at the great monument. Away from the farmers' homes, at the monument which reminds and advises (monument, from *monere* in Latin - literally, that which brings to mind, advises, instructs, warns, foretells). Beyond the gathering in the forecourt, through the gash in the stone, beyond the blood and the flesh of the meal, are the others. The cromlech gathers people and divides. People united in the collective merging of their dry and broken bones. Those outside divided from what is back in the chamber; those whose bones will mingle, from those who will not receive these rites (for not everyone in the community was interned). And those who enter and know the darkness divided from those who stay outside. These monuments speak of division - sometimes separate chambers and sections, sometimes divisions in the cairn or barrow (lines of upright transverse stones in the cairn at Tinkinswood). Often the focus on the entrance declares a boundary. Having to crouch, squeeze within porthole stone, move along a passage; or remove the material which blocked an entrance. At Tinkinswood a stonefaced rubble bank hides the chamber wall from the forecourt; a stone found nearby was probably a door to the passage. Inside, knowledge of the dry remains perhaps, of



what is done with them, of what they mean; of the monument and its ordering; of the monument in the land, its site and orientation (astronomical alignments).

Were these monuments houses of the dead? A connection or resemblance has long been noted between the monumental long houses of early farmers in central Europe and the long earthen mounds or barrows within which are found chambers and remains of the dead.

What is a house? A house is the everyday setting of the domestic. This may be an ethos of property and nuclear family consumer unit. The idea of home is also a sedimentation of more and other than this. It is belonging and identity. Home, as homeland, may be something to defend and die for, a device to get young men to sacrifice themselves for the interests of a ruling class, as in the Great War. Home is where most people were born, are brought up. It is where even death may be calmed and met (as opposed to violent sacrifice or taking of life). A starting point for journeys terrestrial and conceptual, home is whence I set out on a journey and to where I return.

Novalis: philosophy is a homesickness, a longing to be at home everywhere. Home is a centre from which reality may be constructed and known.

Ian Hodder (1990) tells of a new meaning to home which belongs with the change to farming. He names the set of practices, ideas and feelings associated with house and home *domus*, after the Latin.

I suggest that the social will to sedentism and intensification which ultimately led to economic domestication was created through drama, in the sense that emotions, feelings and fears were aroused in the interplay of concepts surrounding the *domus*. It was drama that created the will to control the wild.

(Hodder 1990, p.41)

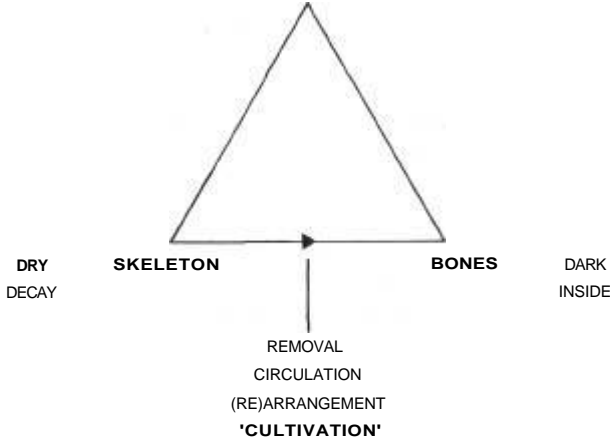
The *domus* was a permanent base, the locus of domestic production, of food preparation and cooking, mothering, caring and security. It necessarily implies its opposite, the *agnos* (from the Greek adjective, living in the fields, wild) - that which is outside the *domus*, the wild, alien, other. House and home, production and emotion: the change to agriculture was made possible by this structure - *domus*, metaphor and practice, ways of feeling, reasoning and acting. The *domus* is domestication - construction of what is taken to be real (social and individual) through intervention in nature. Domestic culture, cultivating the wild. Home transforms the other, making it ours, comforting, nurturing. It opposes hunting, male display and prowess, violence, war, the dispersal of settlement, resources to be found in the uplands, things which are the product of natural processes such as milk and animal products, and beer; opposing death and decay.

**GATHERING**  
FEASTING

MOIST  
BLOOD

FLESH  
**BODY**

LIGHT  
OUTSIDE



NATURE  
**INDIVIDUAL**

SOCIETY  
**COMMUNITY**

MAGICAL POWERS  
**ESOTERIC KNOWLEDGES**



We still live with some of these principles and feel them. As Ian Hodder says, they cling to the very words we use. They may be thought of as 'human'; perhaps they are not that old.

The cromlech Tinkinswood speaks of its farmers constructing what was to be theirs. Its great capstone alone (more so with its megalithic supports and the cairn blocks up to a metre across) expresses co-operation and communal productivity. The community imposing itself on the landscape, domesticating. The monument punctuates the land, ordering space and place in its visibility and in the repeated journeys and returnings to it of the people. So too in the passing from outside to inside. Those farmers recognizing themselves in this experience of stones in the land, and of remains brought through the tear in the stone. The monument reminding. Sacred marker on the boundary between home and the wild, gateway and threshold, a liminal area where the community gathered to find themselves in the other. But it divides as well. The dead and knowledge of their ways are dark and beyond the everyday, a higher domain and sacred. It is the source of legitimation and authority of those who possess the knowledge.

Maesyfelin and Tinkinswood bring together fragments of lives lived long ago, still rich in their associations and allusions of stone and moisture, cooking and consumption, home and cultivation, darkness and entrances, horror and homeliness. The human body as basic metaphor of social experience.

Evocative dramas of death, decay, and the other.

