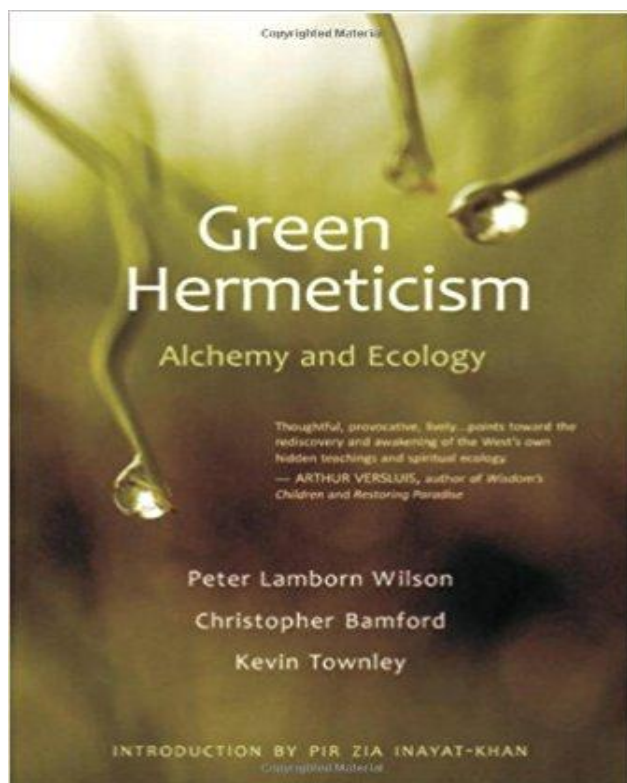


## Green Hermeticism: David Levi Strauss with Peter Lamborn Wilson & Christopher Bamford



**David Levi Strauss:** This is intended to be a brief introduction to Green Hermeticism, and I thought we could begin with a little history. This new initiative began, after a lot of conversation, with a convocation at the Old French Church in New Paltz, New York on the Autumn Equinox, Sunday, September 21, 2003. There were contributions by Peter Lamborn Wilson, myself, Rachel Pollack, Robert Kelly, Lady Vervaine, and Bishop Mark Aelred, with an invocation by Pir Zia Inayat-Khan of the Sufi Order International. The Green Party mayor of New Paltz was also supposed to speak . . . .

**Peter Lamborn Wilson:** But he never showed up. And now he's not the mayor anymore, so that'll teach him [*laughs*].

**Strauss:** The former Green, never Hermetic, mayor [*laughs*]. And then on the weekend of May 18-20, 2007, you and Chris Bamford convened the first annual Green Hermeticism conference at the Suluk Academy, the Abode of the Message, in New Lebanon, New York, where speakers included the three of us, Rachel Pollack, Robert Kelly, Susun Weed, Yakov Rabinovich, Espahbad Michael Yoshpa, and Kevin Townley, among others. Peter, at the first gathering you read an early version of your essay on Novalis's "The Disciples at Saïs," which has now been published in this new book *Green Hermeticism: Alchemy and Ecology* (Lindisfarne Books, 2007). Your reading of "The Disciples at Saïs" is really a manifesto for this movement, isn't it?

**Wilson:** Yeah, that was before we began focusing on the concept of Green Hermeticism. I thought that everyone in the ecological movement should read that book of Novalis's. All points of view would benefit by reading it, but now that we've arrived at our own, I won't say "school of thought" because that's way too ambitious, but Green Hermeticism is another area of ecological struggle. And Novalis is even more relevant to us because of his great Hermetic background.

**Strauss:** So what is Green Hermeticism, and why is it arising now?

**Wilson:** The name arose during this conference, and I don't remember who first said it, but it immediately struck everybody as an idea whose time had come. We all agreed that there is not a sufficient spiritual focus for the environmental movement. And without a spiritual focus, a movement like this doesn't generate the kind of emotional energy that it needs to battle against global capitalism—that for which there is no other reality, according to most people. It should be a rallying call of the spirit for the environmental movement, or for as many parts of that movement as could be open to it. Harvard University Press just did this whole series of books on religions and

ecology: Taoism and ecology, Islam and ecology, Christianity and ecology . . . . The good thing about Hermeticism is that it could fit into any of those religious categories *and* it could appeal to those people who are not part of an organized religion and would never want to be, but who are at least open to the idea of the spirit, because what Hermeticism has to offer is that it is not a religion, and it's not a science. It can't be reduced into any of these categories. The only category that it can be included in is the one that it gives itself, when it calls itself "art," but of course they didn't mean art in quite the modern sense.

**Strauss:** They meant *practice*.

**Wilson:** They meant practice, yes. But it's good that we think of it as an art, because an art could belong to Buddhism as much as to atheism. It could belong to Taoism as much as to Islam, to Christianity as much as to shamanism.

**Strauss:** Chris, where did this all begin for you?

**Bamford:** Well, for me, Green Hermeticism began more than 35 years ago, when I was a graduate student at the Annenberg School of Communications and a filmmaker for the first Earth Day in Philadelphia in 1970. And the little collective I was part of, whose logo, in keeping with the mood of the times, was the mushroom cloud, was very much influenced by Gregory Bateson. His essays—especially one called "Form, Substance, and Difference"—were just beginning to circulate. Later, they were collected in *Steps to An Ecology of Mind*. Bateson made it very clear that human thinking as practiced in the West no longer cohered with nature, or matched reality—that in fact there was a mismatch between our epistemology or way of knowing, and nature's way of knowing. And so the focus of the film we made was that the biggest ecological problem we faced was our whole way of thinking and being. We tried to make the point that if we simply attempted to do ecology out of our existing epistemology, we would only be putting band-aids on problems, which would just emerge much more dangerously later on. Now Bateson, describing our situation, mentioned that, as he saw it historically, there were two ways to look at nature. He called them "Pythagorean" and "Aristotelean."

**Wilson:** Why did he pick Pythagoras instead of Plato in that respect? Just in order to avoid Platonism?

**Bamford:** To avoid Platonic dualism, yes, and to go further back into a more non-dualistic point of view. Pythagoras, the non-dualist, asked after the "how" of a thing: how does it work, what's its pattern, its relationships? Whereas Aristotle, more dualist, wanted to know the "what." What's it made of? In other words, do you ask after substance, or after pattern or process? On this basis, Bateson sketched out a mythological or imaginary pantheon of "pattern thinkers" from the Gnostics and alchemists through the Renaissance Hermeticists, and on up to Lamarck, Blake, and Romantic Scientists like Goethe and Novalis. This was the clue that put me onto the alchemists, who knew the "how," and had an epistemology that consciously sought to give expression to nature's own way of doing things.

**Wilson:** Why Lamarck?

**Bamford:** Lamarck as a more pattern-oriented evolutionary thinker, as opposed to Darwin. Anyway, from that point on I was obsessed.

**Wilson:** Did you know Bateson at that time?

**Bamford:** No, I met him later. But that's what started me on the path of realizing that modern civilization has no adequate epistemology or way to understand nature, to work with her, cohere with her, be a part of her. It made me understand that no task was more vital than recovering an immanent, nature-based way of thinking and being. Bateson gave me the clue that this path lay in Hermeticism and alchemy.

**Wilson:** Do you think that he was the first person to make this connection so clearly?

**Bamford:** He may have been the first to bring in the ecological crisis.

**Wilson:** Yeah, because now we can look back with hindsight and see that all those things were present in these various traditions, but someone had to notice it.

**Bamford:** In our time, the Romantics were the first. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, they were already very aware of what Industrialism and Newton's single vision would bring, and so they plunged into seeking an alternative vision in Neo-Platonism, Giordano Bruno, alchemy, and so on.

**Strauss:** Can you give us a sense of how Bateson's ideas were received then, and how they played out after Earth Day among environmentalists?

**Bamford:** That raises a very fundamental question. Certainly, Bateson's point of view was taken up by a number of scientists like Francisco Varela and Humberto Maturana, who brought a kind of Buddhist epistemology into what still remained basically a biological scientific vision. At the same time, the actual study and practice of alchemy also began to take hold in the interstices of the spiritual subculture—not with any idea of science in the ordinary sense but to try to understand the thing itself. In retrospect, and here is the interesting question, it's not clear whether you can make a leap or bridge from a scientific mentality to a Hermetic one; that is, whether conventional science can somehow become Hermetic, or whether—this not being possible—we are going to have to create a new science-art-spirituality working out of alchemy and Hermeticism on their own terms, thus renewing and re-imagining for our time the ancient sacred science of nature. In other words, perhaps it is in the nature of the project that the bridge will have to be built from Hermeticism to a new kind of science rather than from conventional science to Hermeticism.

**Wilson:** It would be better to say it's all a complex of inter-relating complexities and let it work both ways. You can think of examples of scientists who, I think, started out as scientists then realized later how interesting Hermeticism is, like Ralph Abraham. Or you can think of humanists, like us, drawn towards science because we can see how Hermeticism is incomplete without the hard scientific laboratory aspect.

**Bamford:** You make the point in the book, however, that modern science is perverted and stolen from Hermeticism, and that's true, but at the same time, when modern science was being created, Descartes' friend Mersenne hounded Giordano Bruno and considered him the most dangerous man in the world because he sought to put all things into mind, which smelled to Mersenne of magic. It certainly seemed clear then that the Hermetic and the modern scientific were radically alternative and incompatible approaches to nature. After that, for 40 or 50 years there was a real struggle over

whether science would become Hermetic and compassionate, or Cartesian, rational, dualistic, and aggressive.

**Strauss:** This is a history that's been almost entirely occluded.

**Bamford:** That's right. Except for a wonderful book by Carolyn Merchant called *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. Throughout the seventeenth century, as Cartesianism is developing and heading for Newton, you find Rosicrucians like Robert Fludd, Paracelsians like Van Helmont, all sorts of alchemists, as well as philosophers like the Cambridge Platonists, all trying to create a new culture out of Hermeticism in opposition to the rising mechanistic dualism.

**Wilson:** When does she cut it off? What's her catastrophe date?

**Bamford:** She cuts it off with Newton.

**Wilson:** You see, I think it went on long after Newton.

**Bamford:** It did, but with Newton the paradigm was established, and this continued into the Enlightenment.

**Wilson:** But the long story of how the Newtonians won is important.

**Bamford:** And it was gradual. I'd say there was 40 or 50 years when the battle was still being fought, before the turn was made.

**Wilson:** In hindsight, you can see those kinds of 50-year moments. It strikes me that this story isn't over until practically the end of the nineteenth century.

**Bamford:** And it's not over yet.

**Wilson:** It's still not over. We're raking it up again.

**Bamford:** Goethe, in 1810 with his color theory, is still attempting to overthrow Newton with experimental evidence derived from Hermetic traditions. But Goethe was the underdog. And after his death, by the 1830s and 40s, materialism was absolutely at its apex. The battle seemed lost.

**Wilson:** Yes, I would agree with that chronology, except that I see it flickering on until now really. In fact it's starting to flare up again now.

**Strauss:** Why now?

**Wilson:** In the first half of the twentieth century we had the apparent triumph of the materialists and the anti-ecological and anti-Hermetic paradigms. But then as soon as Einstein and quantum mechanics start coming in, everything got confused again. Now we're at a point where at any moment the whole thing could flip again, in my view. That's why it's worth pushing this idea now, because conceivably—again only in hindsight can we ever be sure—we're at one of those transitional moments when the errors and stupidities of science in the service of Capital become so ghastly and look so terminal, that somehow some sort of revolutionary flip will occur. There'll be a new paradigm. I mean we've been talking about it since the sixties, this emergence of the new paradigm. Maybe it will finally happen.

**Bamford:** Every century there's been such a counter-movement. At the beginning of the twentieth century, emerging from nineteenth-century occultism and theosophy, people like Rudolf Steiner, Gurdjieff, Fulcanelli, Schwaller de Lubicz, René Guénon, and even Jung and the Eranos gnostics like Corbin, Scholem, and Eliade tried to create such a culture. In the previous century you had Romanticism with Blake, Goethe, Novalis, Coleridge and Keats. Between 1780 and 1820, in fact, you had an incredible attempt to remake the world through what we might call Romantic Science, Romantic Medicine, and Romantic Physics. A hundred years before that you had the birth of Freemasonry. And before that, in the seventeenth century, you had the Rosicrucians trying to do the same thing, laying down the pattern—trying to make Hermeticism and alchemy vehicles of cultural transformation.

**Wilson:** You know, that may have been the best attempt to actually seize the paradigmatic moment. The last serious attempt to have victory for the Hermetic worldview might have been the Rosicrucians. And even then there was a touch of irony, even jokiness about the whole thing, which leads you to think in a certain way that they foresaw their own failure.

**Bamford:** Well you're almost into conspiracy theory here, Peter, because the Rosicrucian enlightenment gets completely flattened by the Thirty Years War, whose uncertainty and sheer devastation made the certainties of the materialist view even more attractive. Then Romanticism gets killed by the success of Industrialism.

**Wilson:** Well, in a sense, Romanticism never acted like a movement on its way to victory. It always acted like a movement in reaction to somebody else's victory.

**Strauss:** A melancholic movement.

**Wilson:** Yes, suffused with romantic irony and melancholy from the beginning. But what I am saying is that maybe even Rosicrucianism already has that kind of irony and melancholy about it. You would have to go back to the Middle Ages to find a coherent, unified culture—a previous paradigm that was a real worldview.

**Strauss:** Chris, you call alchemy “the sacred science of Nature,” but then you write, “Nevertheless, in the great revival of mystical esoteric traditions and practices during the last century, the tradition [of alchemy] has—except for a few specialists—been largely ignored *or simply read as psychology*.” That is, dealing with the personal self and self-transformation, as opposed to the world or cosmos, whereas you see alchemy as “the primal cosmological revelation.” Can you talk a little bit about that turn, when alchemy and the terms of alchemy got *psychologized*, and what that did?

**Bamford:** Jung did wonderful work. He recovered alchemy for a lot of the general intellectual reading public, but at the same time he essentially got it wrong: he psychologized it, flattened it, made it one-dimensional.

**Strauss:** And secularized it.

**Bamford:** And secularized it. Denied it its scientific or cognitive or practical efficacy. When I write that alchemy is the transmission of the primordial sacred science of nature, I mean that alchemy and Hermeticism—both of which arrive in the Hellenistic period around the time of Christ, and derive mainly from Egypt and Greece—harken back to previous ancient mystery civilizations or cultures, which have their own kind of primordial science—or art of the care of the gods, the earth, and

humanity—in which the gods, the earth, and humanity are present together in a single process. That is real sacred science. And the point I was making was that, although there is a certain revival of sacred inner sciences—say, Buddhist or Sufi—people today rarely turn to the ancient masters when it comes to their sciences of nature or ecology. They are still in love with modern science.

**Strauss:** You've been pretty emphatic from the beginning that, as far as you're concerned, this needs to be a practical movement, not just a theoretical one. And that's why you brought a practicing alchemist, Kevin Townley (co-founder of the Hermetic school of the Philosophers of Nature), into the mix.

**Wilson:** It's bothered me for a long time that on the one hand you have the neo-traditionalist approach to alchemy which is exemplified in a fairly good book by Titus Burckhardt [*Alchemy: Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul*, translated from the German by William Stoddart], which really just throws the whole laboratory thing out the window, and says that the important thing is the interior transformation. And on the other hand, you have the Jungians, who in my view have flattened the landscape considerably. Also, both of these ideas belong to an earlier period of the twentieth century when ecology and environmentalism as we have it now had not come into being. There was in fact no concept of "crisis."

**Strauss:** When are you talking about?

**Wilson:** I'm talking about between the wars, when people like Guénon on the one hand and Jung on the other, developed their important theories. I think, in both cases, they were unconsciously influenced by the triumphalism of modern science. In other words, scared to take laboratory alchemy seriously in any way and covering up for that timidity with ideology.

**Strauss:** Taking it seriously would have invalidated everything else they were saying.

**Wilson:** Yeah, you'd just be a crackpot if you did that. And Jung wanted to be recognized as a scientist. He still had aspirations in that direction. What the traditionalists were doing was the kind of crypto-anti-body thing, where they think that the soul is so much more important than the body, that the body can be neglected. They get a lot of support for that from classical sources, precisely from around the time that Chris was talking about. One of the strange things about this is that during the same period that all of the sciences of the body and soul, like alchemy, are coming into being, there's a terrific anti-body movement going on, of which Gnosticism and Christianity are two good examples. Christianity vis à vis Gnosticism takes up a pro-body stance, you could say. But then comes the Renaissance and the Renaissance Neo-Platonists, who are in fact not anti-body like the original Platonists tended to be, but are using Platonism to escape from two-dimensional Puritanical Christianity by bringing fresh Pagan breath. Whereas, in the first century Paganism looked awful, moribund, intellectually uninteresting, and the really hot stuff was all this anti-body, pro-spirit, pro-soul kind of thing, most excessively amongst the Gnostic Dualists, but really it swept over everybody. And yet at the same time, paradoxically, this was also the great period for alchemy and the sciences, which link the soul and the body and don't separate them.

**Bamford:** Well, I'd put it slightly differently, although I'm in absolute agreement. Both Jung and the traditionalist Guénon, I think, are still infected with a Platonism that divides the inner and the outer. Jung is a Kantian, and a Kantian thinks that the thing in itself is unknowable. He or she still makes a divide between what you know inwardly and the outer. With an epistemology like that you

cannot understand the original alchemical and Hermetic vision, which draws no boundary between the cosmos, humanity, and earth. These are one reality: single, whole, a uni-verse. So, what might look like the inner work of the alchemist to a Platonist, in a kind of inner process of purification and redemption, is actually also about transforming, purifying, and creating a new earth—an art of redemption, which is not separate from the cosmos itself. One of the meanings of Hermeticism is that it is cosmological. Hermes Trismegistus is called the “Master of the Three Realms,” and these are the cosmological realms—from the Earth, including the sub-earthly realms, through the solar system to the fixed stars. Alchemy and Hermeticism are ecological from the beginning, because they have to do with the care of the earth, the care of the cosmos, the care of the human being, and the purification and development of the “all that is one.” “The earth shall become a sun,” said Campanella in the Renaissance, and this was adopted by twentieth-century alchemists. So that we’re in a different world than the dualistic world that sees a separation between the human, the earthly, the cosmic, and the divine.

**Wilson:** By the way, you can see all these trends in the Corpus Hermeticum, which was clearly not created by a single person or a single group of people because you get fairly extreme Platonic Dualism, even verging on Gnostic Dualism, and you also get a very radical-monist Neo-Paganism in different texts of the Corpus Hermeticum. All of these ideas were floating around in the first century, B.C. and A.D. Some people have confused them. Throughout this whole tradition, you get some people who think these ideas are compatible and some people who think they are not compatible. I, for example, don’t think that Gnostic Dualism is compatible with true Hermeticism. But other people disagree. I don’t think you can hate the earth as much as those people did and still take any interest in doing alchemy and saving the physical earth. As far as the Gnostic Dualists were concerned, the sooner it blew up the better.

**Bamford:** The alchemist can’t separate the destiny of the earth from his own destiny, the destiny of humanity, and the destiny of the cosmos. And that’s why when you’ve got an artist like Joseph Beuys, who is a Hermetic artist, it’s very difficult to know at what level to place these works, which are efficacious and theurgic—they do something. Though Beuys says he a “social sculptor,” is what he does really just social? Or does it have to do with actual geomancy and the future of the earth? How is it related to the cosmos? You don’t know.

**Strauss:** I think that it definitely is Hermetic, but as I said in my talk on Beuys at the conference, that’s been almost entirely ignored or misunderstood by art world commentators, and by most critics writing on Beuys. It’s incredible the extent to which this aspect just disappears, because no one wants to touch it. When you look closely at those objects and the actions over time, you have to ask what would they have been doing if not theurgic work? If they’re not magical, Hermetic acts, what are they? Minimalist sculpture?

**Wilson:** Just aesthetics, as far as they’re concerned.

**Strauss:** “Just aesthetics,” right.

**Wilson:** With a little politics thrown in. After all you can’t avoid that with Beuys.

**Bamford:** We always want to put things into a conceptual frame—make everyone a kind of conceptual artist—rather than simply affirming a self-existing, transformative reality in the world.

**Strauss:** And I think that Beuys was also torn about the extent of his abilities working within the art world, and his engagement in all of these things. I mean he was really an anthroposophical man, in terms of seeing himself as trying to be useful, socially useful.

**Bamford:** But he was also absolutely Hermetic and alchemical. For him, the earth is to become a sun and it is to become a sun through us. And it is also true that whether we speak of Hermeticism or alchemy—Green Hermeticism—as an art, or a science, or a kind of spirituality, above all we must characterize it as primarily dedicated to service and to healing. Today, art—and perhaps also even science—has become more or less a form of self-expression, whereas if you go back far enough into the history of art or science they always had the theurgic function to heal, nurture, and care for the whole: the divine-cosmic-earthly-human cosmos. But for the greatest modern artists, like Cezanne and Braque and Beuys (and also writers like Joyce and poets like Robert Duncan), it still has that theurgic function.

**Wilson:** One has to finally wonder why the hell one should pay any attention to art if it's only self-expression? Who cares what Mr. Beuys thought?

**Strauss:** At that point, it all becomes “self-expression,” and self-expression is an existential dead end.

**Bamford:** Self-expression is really a form of egotism. And you could also say that modern technological science, which is essentially about utility, comfort, and so on, is a form of egotism. Ancient techné used to be about care and nurture and midwifing the works of the gods. It was selfless. Technology, on the other hand, is self-expression in science, while Hermeticism, which continues the traditions of ancient techné, has to do with selfless service. The alchemists are people of prayer. They are dedicated selflessly to the transformation and redemption of society, the individual, and the earth itself.

**Strauss:** Technology has taken over the role of, or displaced in a very direct way, the other techné.

**Bamford:** Modern science, in fact, has become technology.

**Wilson:** Basically... television. [*Laughs*]. The new sacred hearth of the modern world.

**Strauss:** And how do you effect that, how do you turn and transform that?

**Wilson:** Well that's what Green Hermeticism will be about, as opposed to traditional Hermeticism, although intellectually there wouldn't be much difference at all, especially if we could include Beuys amongst our precursors. The only difference would be in regard to the question of practice, and indeed of activism. That's why, again getting back to what I think Green Hermeticism is, I don't think it's anything at all if it's just theory. It has to be a combination of theory and practice, otherwise it's nothing. It's no more than yet another intellectual trip about Hermeticism, which may or may not be interesting. But without the practical side, it simply doesn't exist.

**Strauss:** And what else do you imagine in that practical realm?

**Wilson:** Well, not being a laboratory spagyrist or a scientist, it's a little presumptuous of me, but I was fascinated by the whole idea of bioremediation which is a big subject these days, including in the arts; or the work of people like Paul Stamets, with myco-remediation. I find it absolutely riveting, and it seems to me that if you could contextualize this kind of activity within the



intellectual framework of Hermeticism, you might conceivably have a very powerful epistemic weapon or tool.

As a writer, and we're all writers, the temptation is to look upon the *Green Hermeticism* book as the real product here, but I continually struggle against that, or the conference as the product, or even the academic course as the product. That's not enough. If there isn't a garden, if there isn't a laboratory, if there isn't a bioremediation project, if there isn't something that can move into the real world as well as the intellectual world, it isn't enough.

One reason that Chris and I are so interested in Hermeticism is that it's the western way, without not being the oriental way. I mean, since Hermeticism exists in Islam, and Hinduism, and even Taoism, it's also the oriental way. It seems like the way which doesn't get in the way of anybody else's way. Which seems like a real advantage, possibly. That it's not only Buddhism, or only Christianity, or only secular science. But it could be all those things together with an overarching, unifying imagery.

**Bamford:** What's fascinating about the whole alchemical, Hermetic picture is that it is absolutely universal and goes right back to the beginning—to the primordial revelations, to the first prophet or shaman. How could it be otherwise? Humanity has its being in nature, on earth, under the stars. Therefore nature, the earth, and the stars are common to all spiritual traditions and cultures. Every spiritual tradition and religious epoch has its sacred science, that is taught by nature. All traditions have an alchemical or Hermetic cosmological aspect.

**Strauss:** Built into Hermeticism is a sense of revival, of going back as far as you can go to bring things forward.

**Wilson:** Yes, Hermeticism always has myths of its own origin to take it back as far as history is known. In other words, when Egypt was the earliest known thing, Hermeticists claimed to be Egyptian. Now we know about the Stone Age, and we see that it goes back even farther.

**Bamford:** Which is why I call it the primordial sacred science of nature. As such, it's inevitably practical. But because of the metaphysical desert in which we currently live, particularly in regard to the ecological situation and the sciences of nature, we no longer understand its kind of cosmological practicality. We lack any kind of metaphysical cosmology adequate to the present ecological situation. So the practical work of creating gardens or parks has to go along with a kind of re-inhabiting of a healthy cosmological, metaphysical universe.

**Strauss:** You have to have both theory and practice.

**Wilson:** Indeed, and I'm not saying we should dump theory and have only practice. I'm saying there has to be a balance. But in the twentieth century we got used to the idea of Hermeticism without any practice, without any earth-based practice, and I think we have to change that.

**Strauss:** You say in the book that "Hermeticism provides hermeneutic and heuristic devices for separating good science from bad results." What do you mean by that?

**Wilson:** I mean that if scientists have rethought their position (what Thomas Kuhn would have called a paradigm) to include revived Hermeticism, then they're going to immediately understand that certain scientific technological advances, so called, are in fact disasters. And they will have a higher value than simply capitalism or than supposed "pure reason." They will have something that

goes beyond the reason of money or the reason of reason. Without that ability to go beyond, on some level, there can be no transcendent level. Otherwise, people's psychic energies will not be engaged, and that's been the problem for the leftist approach to ecology, that it simply doesn't have enough . . . .

**Strauss:** Imagination?

**Wilson:** Yes, imagination and excitement. Actually the left is culpable in that it spent the first few centuries of its existence being gung-ho for technological progress. And it's only very recently that what's left of the left has had to turn completely one hundred and eighty degrees on this, and rethink their position about industry and science, and finally they've come to realize that no, it's not just a question of the means of production. *What* you're producing counts too.

**Strauss:** Perhaps now is a good time to talk about "green capitalism," since that's what a lot of people are thinking and talking about. What do you think about that?

**Wilson:** I think that that would be the end of our dream. If green capitalism prevails, then Green Hermeticism will never prevail. And it's not because there is something inherently revolutionary about Hermeticism per se, but it's about the historical position that we've reached in this whole sad story from Newton to the present. Now I have to explain my kind of conspiracy theory about modern science. It's not just that Newton and Boyle and those people stole from Hermeticism and recontextualized it in order to create modern science. They did it with a specific agenda in mind, and that was to give power to the British government, the British Empire. That was actually their motive. And that goes back to John Dee, who was a figure we all admire and find very interesting, but on the other hand we have to realize he was the great propagandist of the British Empire. He saw the way in which you cannot have empire without magic. It seems clear to me that Green Hermeticism is inherently on a collision course with global capital. And if global capital wins, then we lose.

**Bamford:** One of the pathologies we suffer from is an extreme confusion of means and ends. And Hermeticism and alchemy are always means to a single end, which is, depending on who would say it, divine service or healing—so that the divine may become all in all, the hidden treasure known, and the gods rejoice, and put forth their being with us on earth. Those are always the ends. Hermeticism is a means. But when you say "green capitalism," the end is capitalism. It just happens to be green. Green has more of a true end, which would be service, healing.

**Wilson:** My view is that green capitalism is a lie to start with, because capitalism insists that the bottom line is money, and if greenness gets in the way of money, then it's to be sacrificed. If you can have a little bit of green makeup dabbed on capitalism—I'm sorry to say that's what Earth Day turned out to be—then you can loot the world and keep all the Greens happy at the same time, if that's what you want to do. And that's what green capitalism is. In the real world of board rooms and Pentagons and whatnot, they never think about green capitalism. This is just some bullshit for the masses.

**Bamford:** But you agree that one could imagine a green economy.

**Wilson:** Yes, but that wouldn't be capitalism. I won't go so far as to say that it has to be socialist. Historically, we don't have a term for what it could be, which is part of our problem. We're forced

to use words like democracy, which stink in the mouths of corpses, thanks to the regimes that use these terms, including our favorite, our own. [Silence] I shut myself up with my own rhetoric. I'm stunned. [Laughter]

**Strauss:** Peter, in your Green Hermeticism manifesto, you talk about the realignment of radical politics and spirituality. "Now that Marxism has crumbled," you write, "one victor holds the field. Enlightenment Rationalism's greatest victory: the Free Market as inexorable law of nature. The only possible dialectical negation of this thesis, I think, must come from the long abandoned and even repressed Hermetic Left, and from Romantic Science, and from spirituality: Green Hermeticism." Is there enough left of the Hermetic left to do this?

**Wilson:** There was never much to begin with, honestly. But it is real, it's not something I dreamed up. I just got the new edition of Diane di Prima's *Revolutionary Letters*, and it's dedicated to her grandfather, who encouraged her, when she was young, to take an interest in Giordano Bruno and Carlo Tresca and Sacco and Vanzetti and Dante. That's why Diane is the leading anarcho-Hermetic poet: she's Italian. [Laughter] And in Italy today there's a statue of Giordano Bruno, and all the socialists and anarchists go there to lay wreaths, as well as the supposed Roman Hermeticists. Generally, he's a figure of the left in Italy.

**Strauss:** Well, this also gets into a subject that's dear to me, as you know, which is the rise of the image, and image magic [see: "Magic & Images/Images & Magic" in the *Rail*, July/August 2006]. I started reading Bruno with Diane, in the Poetics Program in San Francisco in 1979-80. And at a certain point I realized that Bruno had devised one of the most coherent and convincing theories about the way images work on masses of people that has ever been formulated. And the world that he's describing in those books isn't *his* world, the Renaissance; it's *our* world, now. We live in a Brunonian world.

**Wilson:** It's easier to put a spell on a million people than on one person, he says in his book *De Magia*. If that doesn't describe the entire creation of desire in the modern world, then I don't know what does.

**Bamford:** I was going to add to what you said about what would be a Hermetic polity, because Hermeticism arose out of previous cultural problems, and was practiced by small groups and individuals over time. But clearly a Hermetic polity would be anarchic. It would be a society of selfless individuals, each with their own religion, their own spirituality, because it's the nature of the imagination to be individual and personal. As it says in one of the apocryphal gospels, when Christ entered the room, "each saw him as he was able."

**Strauss:** So you don't need a church.

**Bamford:** You don't need a church, but you have a unity, a unity made up of individuals: one by one by one.

**Wilson:** It's easier to get a million people to fall in love with you than it is to get one person to fall in love with you.

**Bamford:** The implication being that true love would be one by one by one by one. Because, clearly, if you get a million people to love you it's not true love.

**Wilson:** Right. But it could be true desire, for sure. I was just thinking that the origins of what I would like to think of as the Hermetic left must be in Rosicrucianism, even as the opposite is there, because Bruno and John Dee were both in Prague shortly before Rosicrucianism appeared, and their influence is quite obvious. In fact, if you want a get a little bit conspiratorial about it, I think Dee and Edward Kelley actually founded the Rosicrucian Order, with some inspiration from Bruno. The timing would work out for that.

**Bamford:** That's what Frances Yates suggests in *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*.

**Wilson:** So not only was Dee the prophet of empire . . . and don't forget the Rosicrucians were about tolerance, they were about stopping the wars between religions, about amity with the Jews and Turks, and they were about service and healing, and so forth and so on. Not about profit and power. So it's also quite possible to see all that as very much in tune with a radical and even revolutionary strain that runs through Romanticism and Surrealism and Beuys and down to us. Beuys was not only a Hermeticist, he was an anarchist.

**Strauss:** Bruno's theory of how images work on a mass scale is articulated through magic, through the mechanisms of bonding. And this can of course be contravened to do all sorts of other things.

**Wilson:** The Nazis thought about using television to control the masses, but we've actually accomplished it.

**Bamford:** Henry Corbin belonged to this Hermetic luminous tradition in which the imaginal realm, the *mundos imaginalis*, the world of images, is an ontological reality, mediating between the sensory and the spiritual. So that all images actually put us in the imaginal realm. And if you work with images out of less than honorable intentions, you're wreaking magical havoc. Not only on earth, where this has an ecological aspect, but also in heaven.

**Wilson:** The curious thing about Brunonian image magic is that you don't have to even believe in the ontological aspect for it to work. It works as psychology and that's why the techniques of modern brainwashing—

**Strauss:** Well, it works as psychology in that it works on the unconscious.

**Wilson:** Yes, so you don't even have to believe that the people in the CIA and the KGB who work on these ideas literally believe in the ontology that you're describing. In fact quite the opposite: you don't have to because it works. So you have people like Dr. Persinger and so forth carrying on the dark side of Hermeticism, as far as I'm concerned, with brainwashing. Advertising is the same. It's dark Hermeticism.

**Strauss:** That's Couliano's thesis in *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance*.

**Bamford:** Well, let's look right back at the Corpus Hermeticum, where they talk about how the Egyptians used to animate images, sculptures, statues.

**Wilson:** It's the same idea, word for word, in the Indian material, too. It's the same process, even the same name: "Opening the Mouth" of the image.

**Bamford:** It's a single reality. If you create an image, a being will enter it. So if you don't know what images you're dealing with, you don't know what beings will enter.

**Strauss:** It's still very much operative now, even if we're not conscious of it. My theory is that this is really what got transferred onto technical images when they were invented 170 years ago, the need that we have to think of an image as actually not a *representation*, but as an *emanation* of a being that has inhabited it. This need did not go away, and we project that onto technical images—photographs and digital images. That's why we believe them the way we do, that's why we need them so much, why we cling to them. And why we're subject to them, why they can be used to manipulate and control us. But that's where it comes together, and one of the reasons why people don't talk about that very much is because they're afraid of the Hermetic aspects.

**Bamford:** So they'll say, "they're only images."

**Wilson:** That's what liberals always say.

**Strauss:** Well, actually the academic Marxist left has been guilty of that over the years. "They're only images," they're not important, that's not the real political work, dealing with how images operate. That's just aesthetics.

**Wilson:** Those people always forget that words are also images. That writing is full of imagery. I mean, letters themselves are images.

**Strauss:** Fulcanelli said, "Chemistry is the science of effects; alchemy is the science of causes." Which made me think that as long as we continue with the allopathic approach to the current illness of the world, basically treating effects or treating symptoms, we'll never be able to heal the world. We'll continue busily treating symptoms until it's all gone, until we're gone.

**Bamford:** That is very tricky. True, it's a science of causes, not the science of effects, and just as one of the great Romantic philosophers, Coleridge, said, a phenomenon cannot be the cause of another phenomenon. Which is also exactly what the philosopher David Hume said. Just because things happen in association with each other constantly, we think that one causes the other. But you have absolutely no justification for saying that. Material causality, horizontal causality, is fraught with illusion. On the other hand, you don't want to fall into a kind of Platonism in which the causes are somehow outside—in the imaginal, in the spiritual—and separable from the phenomenal realm. For the alchemist, the cause is always present in the effect.

**Wilson:** Doesn't Goethe say somewhere that the thing is always an adequate symbol of itself?

**Bamford:** He famously says that the phenomenon is already the theory. I think it's one of the tasks of Green Hermeticism to ensure that Hermeticism and alchemy are not interpreted in a dualized, Platonic theory or epistemology, that we really make an effort to understand that the phenomenon is it.

**Strauss:** If you can read it.

**Bamford:** If you can read it, right.

**Strauss:** Poetics and Hermetics both have to do with the reading of signs.

**Bamford:** "Reading the Book of Nature" is what Hermeticism called it. Islamic alchemists used the term *ta'wil*, which means returning a sign to its source. The adage of the medieval alchemist was "to imitate nature in her mode of operation." Actually that was the definition of art also. "Art is the imitation of nature in her mode of operation," according to Aquinas.

**Strauss:** Chris, you say that the Hermetic movement “arises as being encounters resistance, non-being. Between the two—between one and two—consciousness arises: a relationship.” What I wanted to ask you is, what’s happened to that relationship?

**Bamford:** Alchemy and Hermeticism are about the primacy of the in-between. Reality and healing and transformation and creation and art are in the in-between, the both-and. And to the extent that we lose the ability to be in-between, we lose the world, and, for now, we have lost the ability to be in-between, and we have lost the world.

Taken from *The Brooklyn Rail* by David Levi Strauss on January 18, 2018

<https://artwriting.sva.edu/journal/post/green-hermeticism-david-levi-strauss-with-peter-lamborn-wilson-amp-christopher-bamford>