

The End of Fiction: Botho Strauß's *Kongreß. Die Kette der Demütigungen* and *Fragmente der Undeutlichkeit*

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Initial impressions might suggest that the two works Botho Strauß published in 1989 are different to the point of incomparability. *Fragmente der Undeutlichkeit* is a two-part meditation on the role of the poet, that, in view of its fragmentary form, can be seen to belong to a line of development characterizing Strauß's most recent prose writing (*Niemand Anderes*, *Beginnlosigkeit* and *Wohnen Dämmern Lügen*). In these works, the relatively coherent narrative structure of the earlier novels (by comparison at least) has been abandoned in favour of a virtually exclusive focus on more disjunctive forms of writing such as prose-sketches, aphorisms and essayistic reflections. By contrast, *Kongreß. Die Kette der Demütigungen*, a fictional text with a clear narrative thread, is Strauß's only work of recent years that can, with any accuracy, still be called an "Erzählung" in any traditional sense. It is certainly the case here, as with all of Strauß's work, that any concept of cohesive narration can be applied only loosely at best. Frequent dislocations within an essentially coherent narrative construct have been a recurrent feature of Strauß's prose style since the early 1970s. *Kongreß*, with its two distinct halves and its stories within stories, is no exception in this respect. Nevertheless, the disparate narrative elements are combined in such a way that a clear "story-line" emerges. In fact, given that Strauß's depiction of his protagonist's experiences gestures ironically in the direction of the "Bildungsroman," one can even talk in terms of a distinctly linear dimension to the narrative. In this respect *Kongreß* looks back to Strauß's novels and stories of the 1970s and early 1980s, to works such as *Marlenes Schwester*, *Die Widmung* and *Rumor*.

The tone of the two works is also very different. The first part of *Fragmente*, "Jeffers-Akt," is conceived as a homage to the American poet, Robinson Jeffers, while in "Sigé," the contemplative second part, Strauß takes stock of his own work to date and reflects in what form – if at all – it will be possible for him to continue writing. *Fragmente* as a whole bears witness to the pain of the

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