

## Interlude\* "The Others"

*Octavio Paz*

My deepest and most enduring impressions of the summer of 1937 do not concern my encounters with writers or the political discussions that kept me and my companions awake long into the nights. It was the encounter with Spain and her people that shook me: seeing landscapes and historical sites with my own eyes, touching stones with my own hands, that I had known in books since childhood. It was also, and to be honest, above all, my meetings with simple soldiers, farmers, workers, school teachers, journalists, boys and girls, old men and women. With and through them I learned that the word *fraternity* was no less precious than the word *liberty*; it is the daily bread, the shared bread, of humanity. I do not say this as a mere literary figure.

One night, while Valencia's anti-aircraft batteries held off the enemy's advance, several friends and I sought refuge in a nearby village in order to escape the bombs that were being dropped along the road. When the peasant who offered us shelter learned that I was from Mexico – a country that was helping the Republican cause – he ran out into his garden in spite of the bombardment and retrieved a melon, which he promptly shared with us, along with a loaf of bread and a jug of wine.

I could of course tell other stories but I prefer to conclude here with the memory of an incident that profoundly affected me: as part of a small group (and Stephen Spender will remember this, for he was one of our number), I had the opportunity to visit the campus of the University of Madrid, which was located on the

\* This Interlude is an excerpt from a presentation by Octavio Paz on 15 July 1987 at Valencia. The meeting commemorated the Second Congress of Antifascist Writers held at Valencia in 1937.

front lines. Led by an officer, we passed through buildings and rooms that had formerly served as libraries and lecture halls but were now used as trenches and military blockhouses. Reaching a huge enclosure, which was protected on all sides with sandbags, the officer signaled us to remain silent. On the other side of the wall we could clearly and distinctly hear human voices and laughter. In a low voice I asked, "Who's that?" "It's 'the others,'" the officer replied. At first his words simply stunned me; then my shock turned to immense pain. This was the instant that I realized – and it was lesson I would never forget – that our enemies too have human voices.