

At Night the Cats

by Antonio Cisneros; translations by Maureen Ahern, David Tipton and Will Rowe OK p.1

Antonio Cisneros, the most distinguished poet now writing in Peru, is today one of the major poets of all Spanish America. The 76 poems collected in this generous bilingual edition represent the best of Cisneros' work, published in six volumes in the last 20 years. In 1955 Cisneros won the Peruvian National Poetry Prize for his first book, "Royal Commentaries" (1964), published when he was a mere 22. The title is significantly the same, as that used by the Incan Garcilaso de la Vega, the first American-born writer of distinction, who preserves the

Reviewed by Jack Schmitt Los Angeles Times

Inca. version of his people's past Cisneros' book, imbued with a remarkable sense of history, is an irreverent and "revisionist interpretation of Peru's past. His early poems, characterized by their epigrammatic brevity, are lean and taut, precise in language and ironic in tone. The precocity evident in the "Commentaries" led critics to expect much of Cisneros, and their expectations were more than fulfilled when four years later he published his second book, "Ceremonial Song Against an Anteatr" (1968), for which he was awarded the Casa de las Americas Poetry Prize for all Spanish America. By then he had become a Master of the long verse line, which he uses to this day, and his sense of history, broadened by his years of residence and lecturing abroad, had come to embrace the entire Western world. But he did not forget his roots in the Third World, and his Interpretation of Western history and culture remains critical.

In the last 14 years Cisneros has published four more Books that show the development of an important
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poet and confirm his reputation.

Other features of the poetry of Cisneros' maturity that cannot but impress the reader are his exquisite craftsmanship; his intensely poetic imagination; his stunning images and metaphors, often surreal; his incisive irony and droll humor, sometimes wistful, often self mocking; his personal, confessional tone; his decorum and reserve, so typical of Peruvians, and also his passion and tenderness, reined in, just enough to make his poems the more heart-rending.

It is much to the credit of translators Maureen Alien), David Tipton and "Will" Rowe that they succeed in capturing the essence of Cisneros' style and voice in their fine translations of the Spanish originals. Tipton's afterword ("Translating Cisneros") is also a moving account of his meeting with Ahern in Peru more than 20 years ago; their friendship and subsequent collaboration on other translations and literary reviews; their mutual friendship with Clayton Eshleman in Peru; Ahern's helping hand in dealing with Cesar Vallejo's difficult wife, a harrowing story told by Eshleman in the introduc

tion to his monumental translation of Vallejo's poetry (Eshleman/Barcia, "The Complete Posthumous Poetry," University of California), and their years of selfless devotion to Peruvian writers and letters. Their translation of Cisneros' "At Night the Cats" is a generous and altogether praiseworthy enrichment of Anglo-American letters.

Schmitt is a professor of Latin American literature at Cal State Long Beach whose latest work is a translation of Pablo Neruda's "Art of Birds" (University of Texas).

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