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 NAVSA 2018: Looking Outward

Looking Outward through William Watson's *The Purple East: A Series of Sonnets on England's Desertion of Armenia*

From the Crimean War to the end of the nineteenth century, Britain's foreign policy, shaped by the rivalry of Benjamin Disraeli and William Gladstone, supported Turkey against Russia, whom the British did not want to gain territory and influence that could threaten their commercial interests and trade routes to India and the Far East. European-negotiated treaties that followed several Russo-Turkish wars inevitably considered the treatment of Christian subjects in Turkey and the Balkans (notably Armenians living in Turkey), who were championed by Russia. Because of prevailing economic and foreign policy interests, Britain maintained wary support of Turkey, to whom it conceded authority in the hope of checking its authoritarian impulses. However, from 1894-96, Turkey under the dictatorial rule of Sultan Abdul Hamid II, who was unwilling to grant Armenians the justice and security given to Muslims, was responsible for the massacres and deaths of approximately 200,000 Armenians, a precursor to the 1915 Genocide. Yet Britain did not intercede. As British poet William Watson notes in his Preface to *The Purple East* (1896), poet laureate Alfred Austin in response to Watson explains that "although the continued torture, rape, and massacre of a Christian people under the eyes of a Christian continent may be a lamentable thing, it is best to be patient, seeing that the patience of God Himself can never be exhausted."

The paper I am proposing will explore this episode from Britain's imperial history through British poet William Watson's eighteen-poem sonnet sequence *The Purple East*. These sonnets call for humanitarian intervention on behalf of the Armenians as a paramount responsibility while making England self-consciously look outward at its empire and its role as a world power as well as look back at itself. I will argue that using the sonnet form, with its ability to capture and highlight poignant transitions of feeling and emotion, Watson critiqued definitions of nationalism, the meaning

of Christian values, and the goals of foreign policy. *The Purple East* is, to borrow from critic Patricia O'Neill, an important instance of "poetic engagement in public affairs" (qtd. in Peter Balakian's *The Burning Tigris*, 2003). Watson's poems exemplify the notion of literature as action. (*Punch* published cartoons condemning the "Bloody Sultan" and his policies.) For example, in "Craven England," the speaker exclaims, "Never, O craven England, nevermore/ Prate thou of generous effort, righteous aim!/Betrayed of a people, know thy shame! (1-3). In another sonnet "The Price of Prestige," after noting that England "[drives] the steeds/ Of Empire," the speaker asks, "Can her pillared fame/Only on faith forsworn securely stand,/On faith forsworn that murders babes and men?/Are such the terms of Glory's tenure?" (9-13). And in "To The Sultan," the speaker envisions a special place in hell for "Abdul the Damned": "Thou, with the brightest of Hell's aureoles/Dost shine supreme, incomparably crowned,/Immortally, beyond all mortals, damned" (2; 11-14). Watson's impassioned sonnets were an integral part of the debate over The Armenian Question during which Gladstone defined his final years as prime minister through his outrage at Turkish atrocities against Armenians, which were publicized in Britain, and his call for cooperation with similar protest voices in the U.S. His ethical and moral stance contrasted with Disraeli's realpolitik perspective informed by the politics of empire. My topic highlights Watson's important but overlooked sonnet series inextricably linked to and shaped by British history and foreign policy.