2020 Birthday Lecture: Fear and Loathing in Genre New England

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Now, in the heat of summer, isn’t the best time for this metaphor, but soon enough it will be: the New Englander walks through dead histories the way they walk through leaves in the autumn, whether they are conscious of it or not. I don’t mean the remnants of the past, though I guess I mean that, too. I mean dead historical projects, the wreckage of teleologies and of ways of organizing experience into meaning, from Puritanism to the upper-middle-class suburban liberalism with which many of us grew up. Fragments from these projects exist everywhere from our spacial arrangements to place names through political structures and culture.

How is this different from anywhere else? How much does it matter, even if it is different? Well, for most people, it isn’t and it doesn’t. I would argue that while many, arguably most, regions of the country and the world are haunted by the past, relatively few have New England’s background of abortive historical and social experiment. But white settlement is white settlement, whether under socially/theologically ambitious Puritan auspices or relatively lackadaisical Virginian ones. And how much does any of it matter now? We’re all under capital’s domain. Regionalism is a dead end. I don’t even really have any heritage connection with New England’s first and most ambitious telos, that of the Puritans. I am descended from a rogue’s gallery of the sort of Catholics the Puritans feared and loathed most, and from Jews, who the Puritans thought they had replaced. So . . . what are we doing here, talking about New England like it means something?

Well . . . I think historical consciousness is a recursive process. It’s not the dumping in of information and correct opinions into one’s head. Historical understanding changes you as you understand historical change. Especially when a history is something other than facts on a page, but leaves an imprint on lived experience, it enters into you and becomes a part of you. It comes in through the things you see every day, the structures of space, childhood perceptions and memories, on and on.
In short, I think I’ve taken on New England-ness, whether I like it or not. And though my interest in New England has bored many and may yet bore you all if it hasn’t already tonight, I don’t think I’m the only one. More than any particular New England project — Puritan or Transcendentalist, the politics of white ethnicity or of suburban liberalism — I identify with the long history of dead projects itself. Something has made the people here look at the world — a world they see as bound by forces much larger than themselves — and say, “we’re going to do something different, here, and that different something will reverberate throughout the rest of the world.”

To make myself perfectly clear, I don’t really agree with or look to pursue any of the projects with which historical New England is broadly associated, with the exception of abolitionism, which was really a national project. My project is a radical anti-capitalist project. Most of the projects that define New England history have been pretty pro-capitalist, whatever else they’ve been. Moreover, the major New England projects have by and large not been about redistributing power downward but instead about creating systems of power that elide and short circuit power struggles. This is true of the most proximate project, suburban liberalism, with its notion that class conflict can be solved through expanding the pie of prosperity and education, as much as it was true of the granddaddy of them all, Puritanism, which sought to make a literal contract with God to fix the theologico-political problem — the original in “solutionism,” looked at in a certain way. Still, I can’t help but see something in the extended history of patient but defiant world-reconstruction that’s important . . . somehow.

One thing about New England-ness that differs from, say, Southern-ness, is that the various projects of New England have aimed themselves at the universal. If there’s a central paradox to New England identity, it’s that we’ve built a particularism out of being fixated on the universal (you can say that Southerners have built a universalism out of being fixated on their particulars, but that’s outside the scope of this birthday lecture). What we do is meant to ramify outwards, from the City on the Hill envisioned by the Puritan fathers to the standardized American canon enshrined by the people who decided the Puritans were a big deal in the first place (New England is also recursively self-reflective). This means, among other things, that New England intellectual products are meant for export, so much so they turn into kitsch when restricted to the local. How much would the work of Melville and Hawthorne mean had the early American Studies scholars who brought them into the canon not made them into broadly American, even international, literary figures, not just New England ones? It’s an open question and not really one we can answer. From where I sit, the best we can do is hope that through diligent application of ourselves — the usual New England answer — we can produce a worthwhile circuit between the New England-ish and the global that gets past the ways in which New England-ness has been willingly incorporated into a provincial/imperialistic American project of state-building and culture-construction.
It’s not all a matter of high culture, either. Tonight, we’re going to discuss two New England writers with a broad impact on genre culture. One is Howard Phillips Lovecraft, the architect of cosmic horror as we know it and of much of nerd culture in general; the other is Dennis Lehane, a contemporary figure who looks to play an outsized role in the shaping of crime fiction as a genre. As writers for a popular audience (though Lovecraft was famously indifferent to who was reading him), both constructed a picture of New England for export — Lovecraft’s spooky, haunted New England of ancient port towns and isolated rural valleys hiding dark secrets, Lehane’s gritty blue-collar neighborhood Boston as site for crime dramas. Both deal in themes mooted by many other New England writers — fear and evil. Neither set out to be philosophical or political writers, but I think both construe and export New England-ness in ways that are indicative of the larger contradictions at work in living in the region in a historically-conscious way.

Let’s get one thing out of the way briefly before we proceed: say “New England genre writer” and probably the first name that comes to mind is Stephen King. I’m not going to write about King beyond this paragraph because I don’t find him interesting. He’s written so much there’s probably examples of his work where this isn’t the case, but it largely seems his New England is there for local color, a little spooky-dead-tree action of the sort inspired by what any idiot who looks outside around here on a late autumn afternoon would see. I don’t hate Stephen King, he seems like a decent enough guy, but his work never grabbed me, and I’m already dealing with one writer — Lovecraft — who I don’t love and another — Lehane — who has written his share of turkeys, too. Write your own birthday lecture if you want one on Stephen King.

That out of the way, I guess it would be a good idea to give the introductory version of our two subjects for those who might not be familiar. H.P. Lovecraft lived in the early twentieth century and wrote short horror fiction. Never a success in his relatively short life, his works were collected by a small coterie of avid fans and published and promoted in speculative fiction circles, where they eventually reached a degree of success that made Lovecraft an icon. Chief among these stories are the “Cthulhu mythos,” stories of a set of “elder gods” (like the titular Cthulhu), monstrous immortal beings that exist outside of historical time and occasionally come around to terrorize humanity. Lovecraft’s themes include the smallness and insignificance of mankind in the face of the vastness and coldness of the cosmos, and the connected idea that rationality and sanity are but a small island on a vast sea of the irrational. He was also, as I’m sure many of my listeners are waiting for me to point out, a cask-strength racist. Like many white men obsessed with decline and irrationality in his time (and ours), he racialized his fears, projecting them onto a racial other of people of color and immigrants. Many of his stories and even more of his voluminous letters reveal a rancid and febrile racism that even his various defenders can’t quite justify or explain away. More than his stories, the tropes Lovecraft bequeathed to horror and speculative fiction (and nerd culture in general) are his legacy — and people have been battling with the racism embedded in those tropes for some time now.
Dennis Lehane is still with us and relatively young — born in 1965. Starting in the early nineties, he's written a series of crime novels, most of them set in Boston, which became best-sellers. Several of his books — *Mystic River*, *Gone Baby Gone*, *Shutter Island* — have been made into successful movies. I would say if there's a center of his work it's the adventures of his two Boston private eyes, Patrick Kenzie and Angela Gennaro, who starred in a series of novels in the nineties and oughts and who roamed Lehane's Boston landscape in a Balzac-ian span from the lower depths of the slums to the heights of corporate and political power. Lehane is also a screenwriter and TV writer, having written for *The Wire* for instance (I get the idea — I haven't been able to confirm — that the "McNulty as fake serial killer" bit might have been his). More than any particular theme, I think Lehane's contribution to the genre has been setting and mood — the popularization of "gritty," "authentic," working-class and generally white spaces as a setting for contemporary crime fiction, and the actors in this space as conflicted, morally and ethically compromised, given to earthy fixations, but basically good, and confronting evil sometimes in the form of societal corruption but more often in the form of individualized pathology and innocence tragically corrupted. Like Lovecraft, more than anything Lehane lives through the recognizable tropes he gave to his genre — once you learn to recognize them, you see them all over the place on TV and in the movies.

With similarities, come contrasts. Most notably, Lehane has been a success in this life, a bestseller and Hollywood resource, whereas Lovecraft lived in genteel poverty with his indulgent aunts. Lovecraft came from the Puritan-descended upper crust of Providence society whose family lost all of its money. Lehane's parents are Irish immigrants to Boston and their family story seems to be one of upward mobility. Along with racial and ethnic minorities, Lovecraft also feared and loathed sex — he was married for a little while, to a woman most of his biographers agree was too good for him (and a Jewish lady, go figure, considering Lovecraft's ideas on Jews), but it's not certain he ever consummated the relationship and in general, treated the body as a source of horror and contempt. Lehane, for his part, is pretty horny, and has, if his writings are an indication, a quite bodily idea of love and pleasure. Seemingly every book has a designated lust object, Kenzie and Gennaro spend a few volumes in a will-they-won't-they (they do, then they don't, then they do again, if I remember the books right), and Lehane's male perspective characters are generally suckers for the dames, though not so much they can't recognize a bad one when they see one . . . eventually.

Both write about New England with a profound sense of place. It goes beyond "local color" and you can tell because they do indulge in mere "local color" when writing about other places — Lovecraft's occasional dip into orientalism, Lehane's periodic excursions into Florida, his second home and another frequent recent crime fiction setting. New England is something more than that for them.

For Lovecraft, New England was the place for the "searcher after horror," "the true epicure in the terrible, to whom a new thrill of unutterable ghastliness is the chief end and justification of
existence.” “... for there, the dark elements of strength, solitude, and grotesqueness, and ignorance combine to form the perfection of the hideous.” All this is from his 1920 story “The Picture In The House,” wherein an unsuspecting traveler happens upon an old house in way out of the way Massachusetts inhabited by an ancient man who turns out to be both a fan of old, unwholesome books about cannibalism and the practice itself. Lovecraft followed up his own advice, setting many of his stories in what has come to be called “Lovecraft Country,” a fictional swath of New England encompassing towns like Arkham, home of Miskatonic University, with its faculty penchant for prying into things man wasn’t meant to know, and Innsmouth, the fishing town with some fishy secrets. Other stories are set in actual New England towns, like Brattleboro, Vermont, near where I went to college, Salem with its famous witchy associations, and of course Providence, Lovecraft’s beloved hometown.

What Lovecraft valued about New England, both as a site for horror fiction and as a place to live, is the thickness of its history and that history’s visible traces. Lovecraft was obsessed with eighteenth-century architecture and city design, touring the New England seaside towns and his own native Providence to find examples of colonial architecture unsullied, as he’d put it, by such modern gaucheries as Victorian houses or modern constructions. He insisted that the eighteenth century was more real, more alive for him than the present. This, of course, did not help with the declension narratives that he embraced which, in turn, led him to bigotry towards those he could regard as the visible agents of degenerative change — recent immigrants to New England, many of them Catholic or Jewish where his ancestors were Yankee Protestants, and people of color.

Lovecraft’s life took place during a long shift in emphasis in the historiography of New England. Some of the first real historians America produced were New Englanders praising their Puritan ancestors as the architects of what would become America — they call this the “filiopietistic” school of New England history. Almost immediately concurrent with this, you got histories, including some by other New Englanders with equally solid Puritan-descendant bona fides, writing about how the Puritans were nothing but bigots and cranks, and arguing that America as a civilization emerged out of dissent against the Puritan theocracy. I could bore you with a play by play, filled with those triplicate Yankee names that once dominated American academia, but I’ll spare you. This back and forth went on for decades. The skeptical side, helped along by Jazz Age critics like H.L. Mencken who used the term “Puritan” for anything that threatened their good time, from Prohibition to any whiff of social conscience, was winning by the time Lovecraft was doing most of his writing.

What did Lovecraft think of the Puritans? Well, he was an atheist, and sometimes, like Mencken, used “Puritan” to mean outdated, old-fashioned, unscientific. But Puritans definitely made up part of Lovecraft’s idea of New England-ness, and not simply as antagonists, either. It was Puritans and their descendants who reached into the outer darkness Lovecraft depicts as being the baseline reality in stories such as “The Shadow Over Innsmouth,” “The Dreams of the Witch House,” etc. Something
compelled them forwards, and if Lovecraft doesn’t quite praise the inclination to press the cosmic envelope, he also clearly relates to it — he would have much less to write about if he didn’t.

Perhaps his most interesting comment in this vein was in one of his many letters to a friend, where he writes that the Puritans were “the only really effective diabolists and decadents the world has known; because they hated life and scorned the platitude that it is worth living.” By “decadent,” Lovecraft is referring not to just moral decline, in the pejorative sense of the term, but to the artistic movement of Decadence, which reached its height of popularity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Decadence emphasized the beauty of the artificial, the sickly, the decayed, the dream-like, in opposition to prevailing Victorian tropes at the time.

This doesn’t sound much like either the filiopietistic version of the Puritans, who were above all else standard-bearers of virtue, or the skeptic version, which held the Puritans were fraudulent pious hypocrites. Lovecraft elaborated in the vein that the Puritans in New England sought to create a totally new and artificial reality. To Lovecraft, it was more important that this reality be a “gothic” chiaroscuro of divine light and infinite human depravity than that it be a novel attempt at reconstruction of society from the ground up on largely new premises. He was, after all, a horror writer.

But around the time Lovecraft was writing that letter, a new generation of historians were rethinking the Puritans. They did not have Lovecraft’s aesthetic commitments to the Gothic but their thought did share certain structural elements with Lovecraft’s depiction of the Puritans. These were the early American Studies scholars, and lead among them was historian Perry Miller, who wrote a two-volume intellectual history of Puritanism in New England, *The New England Mind*, the first volume of which appeared in 1939, two years after Lovecraft’s death. Like Lovecraft, Miller emphasized the world-building element of the Puritan project, the construction of an intellectual (largely theological) scaffolding for a new way of living on Earth and in relation with a transcendent and unforgiving universal order – the pattern for New England’s projects ever since. The conflict between the filiopietistic and the skeptical school of Puritan historiography was largely over whether it was ok for people to tell you how to live your life in the details of things like drink, dance, cards, theater, etc. — culture war stuff, basically, *avant la lettre*. Miller insisted that what made the Puritans special wasn’t their morals (which weren’t that different from prevailing seventeenth century ideas, if somewhat stricter) but their challenge to the prevailing solutions to the theological-political problem and matters of the relationship between God and man and man and man. Instead of ticky-tacky judgments over this or that Puritan rule, Miller focused on the intellectual, social, and political dimensions of Puritan belief, how it changed over time, and how despite Puritanism largely guttering out by the end of the seventeenth century (with a grisly death spasm in the Salem witch trials), it’s that intellectual — not religious or moral — lineage that makes the Puritans relevant to Americans today. Fun fact — The
Handmaid’s Tale is dedicated in part to Perry Miller. Margaret Atwood studied with him at Harvard, sometime before Miller drank himself to death in 1963.

So, in a weird way, the horror writer and the historian converged on their judgment of the Puritans and their legacy in New England. In many respects, Miller and his cohort fought hard to avoid the conclusions Lovecraft came to regarding Puritanism and New England. The American Studies scholars saw New England as the seedbed for a larger American project, not as a region unique in and of itself as Lovecraft did, and they saw the Puritan/New England project as basically wholesome (if tragically flawed) and world-building, not as gothic and world-negating like Lovecraft praised it for being. They came to dissimilar conclusions about what to do about it, but both Lovecraft and the American Studies scholars that Miller stood among and taught saw the Puritans as their figurative ancestors (if also sometimes incidentally their literal ones) in a project of taking a world that wasn’t quite right and... here they depart. For Lovecraft, there was no solution to the not-rightness of the world. New England became a site for fear in part because of the mismatch between the heightened ambition of the Puritans to shape the world and the world’s indifference to human effort. The American Studies scholars largely elided the philosophical question in favor of literary-critical, historical, and political ones, which in a way is as much of an answer as any.

Dennis Lehane is, at least from what I’ve read of him, which is most but not all of his work, fairly quiet on the subject of the Puritans. Indeed, his New England and his writing in general seems to locate what transcendence is to be had not in any kind of larger social project but in individual romantic and familial love. I say “his New England” but really, his locally-based novels focus fairly strictly on Boston (except one, the last of the Kenzie-Gennaro novels, which has an extended excursion to, of all places, my dear hometown of Foxborough, Massachusetts, which he depicts as a suburban hole in the ground, fairly enough). And his Boston is no shining city on a hill, as I’m sure he or his marketing people would assure us. There’s no grandiose political-theological ambition to places like Lehane’s old neighborhood of Dorchester, at least not for a long time. Lehane’s Boston — which became the Boston or (insert postindustrial city here) of many another popular crime novel or tv serial — is, to use the now somewhat cringeworthy term, “gritty” and blue collar. The locals manufacture things and the locale manufactures childhood trauma, not abstractions about god and man or man and man or whatever.

In fact, the Boston historiography often specifically aligns “ethnic” (usually meaning Irish) political and cultural styles against Yankee/Puritan-descended ones, with the ethnics slowly but surely winning out. The Yankees represent politics understood in an upright, elitist way in the service of a transcendent project of civic virtue - the Irish represent mass politics in the service of the material succor of a poor people - the end. This is the explicit framing of such works as J. Anthony Lukas’s Common Ground, on the Boston busing crisis, and of Jack Beatty’s The Rascal King, a big life-‘n-
times biography of James Curley, the flamboyantly corrupt Irish-American politician who has come to
meme-tically represent white ethnic politics in twentieth-century Boston.

Both of these are good books, well worth reading. But... I think there’s more to it than that. I actually
think that in its own way, ethnic politics as pioneered in Boston and practiced in much of urban
America in a rough century between the eighteen-seventies and the nineteen-seventies was also an
ambitious project of reconstruction of the boundaries of the political in the face of dire structural
constraints. I don’t mean to say here that I think it was a good way of organizing politics, anymore than
I would want to live under the rule of Puritans or think that Transcendentalism was really that much
of a philosophy or any more than I agree with any number of other New England projects and
movements. What I think is that ethnic politics, even at its machine-driven nadir, had a content and a
pedagogy to it, a problem — the reordering of boundaries of inclusion and exclusion in a republic
bounded by the power of racialized capital.

Dennis Lehane engages this past in some of his detective novels. Machine politicians and their police
loom over the proceedings and contribute to his detectives’ sense of ennui about changing anything
structural. His first novel, *A Drink Before the War*, also gets the most into the dynamics of race and
politics in Boston, where his white ethnic detectives come across collusion between similarly white
ethnic political bosses and black gangs, and Lehane opines somewhat raci-ly about the differences
between said black gangs and the white teenage gangs of his youth. Lehane has also dabbled in
historical fiction, most prominently in *The Given Day*, a panoramic novel of the first Red Scare of 1919-
1920, set in Boston. There, the Irish and Yankee power structures combine to crush labor militancy and
anarchism — listeners might find some amusement in Lehane’s earnest but cack-handed attempts to
grasp the differences between leftist groups, echoing the frustrations many a Red Squad cop has
probably experienced.

When asked in interviews about what events influenced him growing up, Lehane cites the Boston
busing crisis. Being a Dorchester native, he was not directly affected by the court-mandated
integration-by-busing between South Boston and Roxbury, but it shook up the city’s neighborhoods
and contributed to a general sense, in the 1970s and 1980s, of decline and change. We haven’t the space
to get into a dissection of the busing crisis here, but I would describe it and its aftermath as a political
cascade failure. Begin with the failure of mid-twentieth century consensus liberalism — which can’t in
fairness be called a New England project, being national in scope, but which certainly had New
England DNA — to meaningfully confront racial inequities in educational funding and outcomes. This
lead to a band-aid Potemkin solution in the form of busing for integration which failed in its stated
goal, which was insufficient to begin with. You also had the failure of urban white ethnic politicians
and the newer type of urban politicians raised up by the black freedom struggle to come up with
meaningful solutions, and, in the case of white community leaders, prevent their communities from
embracing racist violence. There were also little epi-failures like that of much of the Boston left at the time, for what it’s worth, failing to recognize the savage dynamics of white racial revanchism leading to the violence that accompanied busing and instead focusing on what today would be jeeringly referred to as “economic anxiety.

The neighborhood sectarianism reinforced by the busing crisis and deindustrialization’s economic fallout form the background gestalt of much of Dennis Lehane’s fiction (and, implicitly, the genre it has come to influence). In the foreground, Lehane often cites the unlikely-seeming but seemingly-inevitable follow-up: gentrification, emerging threat to the blue-collar authenticity Lehane’s detectives love and which Lehane himself sells in his books. This glorification of white urban authenticity, in turn, probably helps drive white audiences to seek out places like Dorchester and South Boston — I wonder if you could graph sales of Lehane’s novels (or, probably more pertinently, rentals of Good Will Hunting) to real estate prices in the neighborhoods affected. After his first novel, Lehane mostly leaves black people alone, and their neighborhoods too, so the impact of gentrification on them goes unnoticed. Lehane’s not a political writer, as he would probably tell you.

Once Lehane made the decision to leave aside black gangs as villains, he placed great emphasis on that other specter of evil characteristic of the end of the American twentieth century: the sexual abuser of children. In most instances, in Lehane’s fiction, this takes the form of a stranger in a van. This is how it is in Mystic River, which became a briskly-attended, critically-acclaimed Clint Eastwood movie, and his second Kenzie-Gennaro novel involves a literal van-borne squad of kid-diddling serial killers who sometimes dress up as clowns. To the best of my knowledge, there were no Satanists or day care attendants in Lehane’s rogue’s gallery, but otherwise, his work is very much a product of the child-abuse panic of the eighties and nineties.

To be fair to Lehane, he sometimes gets that child abuse most often comes from within a circle of trust, not from strangers in vans. Inter-family abuse comes up quite often in his work. More importantly though is the way in which childhood innocence stands at the center of what Lehane sees as good in the world, and childhood innocence corrupted as, essentially, the root of evil. Kids get abused and that turns them evil and hence into abusers themselves and so the cycle perpetuates. This, more than the downfall of blue-collar Boston, is the tragic element driving much of Lehane’s work — essentially, a local news theory of evil. There’s always someone out there lurking in a van to, one at a time individually, convert the normal into the abnormal and evil. Sometimes, you don’t even need the intervention of an abuser — I don’t think I’m spoiling a twenty-year-old book and blockbuster film when I say the conclusion of Mystic River is, the autistic kid did it, essentially because he was abnormal and hence lacking in the magic of childhood innocence. This, more than his occasional lapse in racial sensitivity, is where I see Lehane converging on Lovecraft’s xenophobia.
Sometimes, though, Lehane upends his own ideas. In what I would argue is his best work, *Gone Baby Gone*, also made into a movie, after slaying a physically grotesque gang of stranger-kid-diddlers, Kenzie and Gennaro come to find out the real villains are those posturing as protectors of the sacred family circle, leading to a profoundly ambivalent conclusion that fits the book’s larger autumnal mood. It’s pretty good, in case you thought I’ve been shitting on the authors unduly this lecture. The thing to keep in mind, I suppose, is that both Lehane and Lovecraft were/are writers who sought to entertain, more than they sought to make the sort of points I’m trying to suss out here they made these points largely by implication, whereas the imperative to entertain (which generally involves novelty, finding new ways to express things) — encouraged change and mixing things up. Some of Lovecraft’s later work, like *At the Mountains of Madness*, evinces much less xenophobia than his earlier stuff, something of which his defenders make much.

What does the protracted struggle between Lehane’s heroes and the greater Boston area’s child abusers (though not, weirdly enough, the Church, as far as I’ve seen) have to do with New England’s history? I would say like a lot of narratives going around Lehane’s hey-day in the nineties and early aughts, it’s (indirectly at least) about the decline of hopes for radical transformation promised in the 1960s and 1970s and disenchantment with the largely hollow replacements late-twentieth-century America provided instead. It doesn’t matter how much social justice you win if a stranger in a van can just do his thing and spread evil like so much coronavirus. I would argue that Lehane, a Gen-Xer, was reared deep enough into the collapse that the possibilities of radical change are so much science fiction to him (a genre he has shown no sign of interest in), as it is to so much — not all! — of his cohort (a potential topic for next year’s birthday lecture- we shall see). This was a national phenomenon, not a specifically New England one.

I think what is characteristic of New England is the recursive nature of these failures of ambitious social projects and their self-reflexivity. To live in New England in a historically-conscious way is to know that you live among the remains of dead historical projects where the participants in which were, in turn, all too aware of their own failings. Lovecraft’s dread of an indifferent cosmos and Lehane’s existential disappointment at the inevitability of individual evil exist against the backdrop of belief in the ability to make the cosmos a place of hope through fulfillment of a contract with the Almighty — Perry Miller referred to the Puritans as “cosmic optimists” — or a belief in the amelioration of human violence and harm via social rearrangements of either a liberal or radical variety. Lovecraft and Lehane’s fears and loathings are dark-mirror reflections of the hopes of transformation on which New England was built and which it continues to generate. What’s more, similar dark forebodings existed within the hearts of the promulgators of these transformational projects themselves. The Puritans began thinking the project was doomed more or less straight off the boat. Philosophical pragmatism, developed down the street at Harvard, is all about the failure of people’s perpetual apparatus and working with and around it. The early American Studies proponents
thought their project to create a positive, thoughtful monoculture for America was deeply unlikely to succeed. Ethnic machine politics and suburban liberalism, opposites in many respects, both understood democracy as a system given to going off the rails and requiring constant input to make work. Hope and fear — both are part of the New England inheritance. It’s something of a package deal, it seems.

I think this hope and fear combo should resonate with many of the people hearing and reading this. The New England pattern of daring to construct something new for the world pre-dates the revolution-counterrevolution cycle that defines so much of modern history and which most historians date to the French Revolution, by which point the Puritans were already a memory. This probably has a little to do with why New England intellectual-cum-political projects so often seem to elide and evade the dynamics of revolution and settle into a kind of tepid liberalism. The many failures of projects to change the world collectively are fecund in their own right, producing the cultural humus from which sprang, among other things, the horror stories of H.P. Lovecraft and the crime fiction of Dennis Lehane. The New Englander lives with these failures as surely as they live with the cold and the humidity and the insufferable sports fans. Maybe it’s just me, but I tend to think these failures are better tonic than a record of easy successes. They’re a reminder that, as inevitably as the leaves come down, it will soon enough be our turn to stand before the implacable universals, however we conceive of them, and see if we have the mettle to go our own way.

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