

NOTES FROM: *Consider the Lobster*, by David Foster Wallace

SUMMARY: This is one of my favorite collections of essays by David Foster Wallace, author of the *insanely good* (and insanely difficult) *Infinite Jest*.

Consider the Lobster is tough to pin down, but you could think of it like the smartest man you've ever met, tackling subjects as complicated and diverse as political correctness, abortion, language, racism, Kafka's novels, and yes, *lobsters*, contorting his mind into uncomfortable shapes and pursuing the truth to its last hiding place, exhausting all logical and emotional possibilities, until he just starts making so much...*sense* that when you finally raise your head from your book, you realize that *yes*, the world is like *that*!

The essays are also *hilarious*, by the way, and deeply thought-out...*constructed* in a way that's just *incredible*. Wallace was absolutely one of my favorite writers and I love how he could write essays on things I didn't *think* I cared about - lobster festivals, dictionaries, John McCain's 2000 presidential race - and help me discover that I actually do.

"The really central Kafka joke: the horrific struggle to establish a human self results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from that horrific struggle."

"The endless and impossible journey toward home is in fact our home."

"Kafka's stories can be imagined as a kind of door. We can see ourselves feverishly pounding on the door, wanting, needing admission. Finally the door opens, but it opens outwards. We were inside what we wanted all along."

"A 'snoot' can be loosely defined as someone who knows what dysphemism means and doesn't mind letting you know it."

"You can't escape language: language is everything and everywhere; it's what lets us have anything to do with one another."

"Listening to most people's public English feels like watching somebody using a Stradivarius to pound nails."

“We are the Few, the Proud, the More or Less Constantly Appalled at Everyone Else.”

“Intellectual integrity means that you have to be willing to look honestly at yourself and at your motives for believing what you believe, and to do it more or less continually.”

“This kind of stuff is advanced citizenship. A true Democratic Spirit is up there with religious faith and emotional maturity and all those other top-of-the-Maslow-pyramid-type qualities that people spend their whole lives working on.”

"A Democratic Spirit's constituent rigor and humility and self-honesty are, in fact, so hard to maintain on certain issues that it's almost irresistibly tempting to fall in with some established dogmatic camp and to follow that camp's line on the issue and to let your position harden within the camp and become inflexible and to believe that the other camps are either evil or insane and to spend all your time and energy trying to shout over them. I submit, then, that it is indisputably easier to be Dogmatic than Democratic, especially about issues that are both vexed and highly charged. The fundamental questions that they involve are ones whose answers have to be literally worked out instead of merely found."

"The only really coherent position on the abortion issue is one that is both Pro-Life AND Pro-Choice. Argument: As of right now, the question of defining human life in utero is hopelessly vexed. That is, given our best present medical and philosophical understandings of what makes something not just a living organism but a person, there is no way to establish at just what point during gestation a fertilized ovum becomes a human being. This conundrum, together with the basically inarguable soundness of the principle "When in irresolvable doubt about whether something is a human being or not, it is better not to kill it," appears to me to require any reasonable American to be Pro-Life. At the same time, however, the principle "When in irresolvable doubt about something, I have neither the legal nor the moral right to tell another person what to do about it, especially if that person feels that s/he is not in doubt" is an unassailable part of the Democratic pact we Americans all make with one another, a pact in which each adult citizen gets to be an autonomous moral agent; and this principle appears to me to require any reasonable American to be Pro-Choice."

"Every time someone I know decides to terminate a pregnancy, I am required to believe simultaneously that she is doing the wrong thing and that she has every right to do it. Plus of course I have both to believe that a Pro-Life + Pro-Choice stance is the only really coherent one and to restrain myself from trying to force that position on other people whose ideological or religious convictions seem (to me) to override reason and to yield a (in my opinion) wacko dogmatic position."

"Claims to Objectivity in language study are now the stuff of jokes and shudders."

"Try to imagine an 'authoritative' ethics textbook whose principles were based on what most people actually do."

"The whole point of establishing norms is to help us evaluate our actions (including utterances) according to what we as a community have decided our real interests and purposes are."

"People really do judge one another according to their use of language. Constantly."

"'Correct' English usage is, as a practical matter, a function of whom you're talking to and of how you want that person to respond - not just to your utterance, but also to you as a person."

"There are many dialects and sub dialects of English that change depending on whom you're talking to and whom you wish to identify with."

"Most of us are fluent in more than one English dialect and in several sub-dialects and are probably at least passable in countless others."

"The dialect you use mostly depends on what sort of group your listener is a part of and whether or not you wish to present yourself as a fellow member of that group."

"Little kids in school are learning about group inclusion and exclusion and about the respective rewards and penalties of same and about the use of dialect and syntax and slang as symbols of affinity and inclusion. They're learning about discourse communities."

"Bullying is the failure to learn about discourse communities."

"Everybody here is learning except the little snoot. In fact, what the snootlet is being punished for is precisely his failure to learn."

"Inclusion is not about language facility in just one dialect, the Standard Written English being taught in the classroom. Even if he scores well in school, events on the playground can prove that he is actually deficient in language arts. He has only one dialect. He cannot alter his vocabulary, usage, or grammar, cannot use slang or vulgarity; and it's these abilities that are really required for 'peer rapport,' which is just a fancy academic term for being accepted by the second-most-important Group in the little kid's life. One kid is punished in class, the other on the playground, but both are deficient in the same linguistic skill - viz., the ability to move between various dialects and levels of 'correctness,' the ability to communicate one way with peers and another way with teachers and another with family and another with baseball coaches and so on."

"I'm respecting you enough here to give you what I believe is the straight truth. In this country, SWE is perceived as the dialect of education and intelligence and power and prestige, and anybody of any race, ethnicity, religion, or gender who wants to succeed in American culture has got to be able to use SWE. This is just How It Is. You can be glad about it or sad about it or deeply pissed off. You can believe it's racist and unfair and decide right here and now to spend every waking minute of your adult life arguing against it, and maybe you should, but I'll tell you something - if you ever want those arguments to get listened to and taken seriously, you're going to have to communicate them in SWE, because SWE is the dialect our nation uses to talk to itself. African-Americans who've become successful and important in US culture know this; that's why King's and X's and Jackson's speeches are in SWE, and why Morrison's and Angelou's and Baldwin's and Wideman's and Gates's and West's books are full of totally ass-kicking SWE, and why black judges and politicians and journalists and doctors and teachers communicate professionally in SWE. Some of these people grew up in homes and communities where SWE was the native dialect, and these black people had it much easier in school, but the ones who didn't grow up with SWE realized at some point that they had to learn it and become able to write fluently in it, and so they did. And [Student's Name], you're going to learn to use it too, because I am going to make you."

"I should note here that a couple of the students I've said this stuff to were offended - one lodged an Official Complaint - and that I have had more than one colleague profess to find my spiel 'racially insensitive.' Perhaps you do too. This reviewer's own humble opinion is that some of the political and cultural realities of American life are themselves racially insensitive and elitist and offensive and unfair, and that pussyfooting around these realities with euphemistic doublespeak is not only hypocritical but toxic to the project of ever really changing them."

"The core fallacy of the politically correct movement is that a society's mode of expression is productive of its attitudes rather than a product of those attitudes. PCE purports to be the dialect of progressive reform but is in fact - in its Orwellian substitution of the euphemisms of social equality for social equality itself - of vastly more help to conservatives and the US status quo than traditional snoot prescriptions ever were. Not to mention that strict codes of egalitarian euphemism serve to brook the sorts of painful, unpretty, and sometimes offensive discourse that in a pluralistic democracy lead to actual political change rather than symbolic political change. In other words, PCE acts as a form of censorship, and censorship always serves the status quo."

"As a practical matter, I strongly doubt whether a guy who has four small kids and makes \$12,000 a year feels more empowered or less ill-used by a society that carefully refers to him as 'economically disadvantaged' rather than 'poor.' Were I he, in fact, I'd probably find the PCE term insulting - not just because it's patronizing (which it is) but because it's hypocritical and self-serving in a way that oft-patronized people tend to have really good subliminal antennae for."

"The basic hypocrisy about usages like 'economically disadvantaged' and 'differently abled' is that PCE advocates believe the beneficiaries of these terms' compassion and generosity to be poor people and people in wheelchairs, which again omits something that everyone knows but nobody ever mentions - that part of any speaker's motive for using a certain vocabulary is always the desire to communicate stuff about himself. Like many forms of Vogue Usage, PCE functions primarily to signal and congratulate certain virtues in the speaker - scrupulous egalitarianism, concern for the dignity of all people, sophistication about the political implications of language - and so serves the self-regarding interests of the PC far more than the groups renamed."

“We who are well off should be willing to share more of what we have with poor people not for the poor people's sake but for our own; i.e., we should share what we have in order to become less narrow and frightened and lonely and self-centered people.”

“Self-interest can be thought of in terms of short-term financial self-interest or longer-term moral or social self-interest.”

“We tend to like experts whose expertise is born of a real love for their specialty, instead of just a desire to be an expert in something.”

“It always seems to be important to have at least one person in the vicinity to hate.”

"On the one hand, there's little sign in the narrator of anything like the frontal-lobe activity required for outright deception."

"This memoir could have been about both the seductive immortality of competitive success and the less seductive but way more significant fragility of all the competitive venues in which mortal humans chase immortality."

"Like all good ad cliches, it manages to suggest everything and mean nothing."

"Slogans invoked by men in nice suits who want something from us."

"If I vote and you don't, then my vote counts double."

“There is no such thing as not voting: you either vote by voting, or you vote by staying home and tacitly doubling the value of some Diehard's vote.”

“When it comes to leadership, there's a difference between believing somebody and believing *in* him.”

"This is alleged either to kill the lobster instantly or to render it insensate, and is said at least to eliminate some of the cowardice involved in throwing a creature into boiling water and then fleeing the room."

“To make someone an icon is to make them an abstraction, and abstractions are incapable of vital communication with living people.”