

Donald Trump offers such consummate political theater—his gargantuan narcissism makes him so mesmerizing to watch—that it is to wake abruptly from an all-enveloping dream to realize that much of what he says has no *content* behind it. His assertions, framed in simple, concrete, direct language, are not policy statements so much as attitudes, the tireless ranting of the man on the barstool beside you, some of them, for example, on how America is being “ripped off” on trade, going back decades, some of them, on “the disaster” of Obamacare, notably, acquired only upon his incarnation as presidential candidate. He is a master at sharpening and giving shape to deep-rooted class resentments, an artist at shrugging into attitudes as if they were costumes, at reflecting and embodying anger.

He is a supreme performer—the billionaire builder with the outerborough accent and tough-guy talk—and as he surfs the applause and cheers and shouts nothing could be plainer than that he understands his audience. He has been understanding it for more than three decades, as a cartoon hero of the New York tabloids. When we would talk particularly to immigrants, recent immigrants who were the readers of the *Daily News*, says columnist George Rush:

He embodied the American Dream to them. Excessive, conspicuous consumption is not a bad thing in New York to a lot of people. It’s kind of comic what he was doing. I’ve always felt like Donald was in on the jokes. He knows he’s over the top, but that’s where he likes to live.

Many in his huge crowds who have watched him for years, firing people on prime-time television, are in on the jokes, too—but only to a point. At one of his rallies, a sixtyish man pronounced in a tone of long-awaited satisfaction:

Ah, this is it: the white working class in America. The ones paying for all the others. Finally we’re getting someone who’ll *do something for us*.

For all the talk of the financial crisis of 2008, that sentiment comes from a much deeper place. “The others” do not work. They are the free-riders on the system, courtesy of the corrupt elite who put in place and then perpetuate programs to support them, in return for which those “others” supply the votes to keep them in power. And most of those others, it doesn’t need to be said—it *can’t* be said because of that damn “political

correctness” that cloaks and stifles us like a blanket—have darker faces and many of them come from somewhere else.

But Trump isn’t afraid to say it. That he shocks the political class was from the start the heart of his appeal. With his fancy suits and huge plane and helicopter, he says what he pleases and won’t sell out to the elite—and this is the elite in the broadest sense: the people who run our government, those who write the news stories and the editorials.

If Donald Trump is truly “in on the jokes,” as the *Daily News* columnist said, it seems plain that some of his more ardent followers are not. “Finally we’re getting someone who’ll do *something for us*.” What exactly would that something be? Will Trump truly be bringing “steel back to Pennsylvania, *like it used to be*”? How exactly will he go about “putting our steel workers and our miners back to work”? How will he turn back three or four decades of history? By imposing a 35 percent tariff, with the collaboration, presumably, of the staunchly free-trade majority in the Republican-controlled Congress?