“OUT OF CHAOS BREATHE CREATION”: HUMAN AGENCY, MENTAL ILLNESS, AND CONSERVATIVE ARGUMENTS LOCATING RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE TUCSON MASSACRE

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In this essay, we examine public responses to Jared Lee Loughner’s attempted assassination of U.S. Representative Gabrielle Giffords, focusing in particular on the rhetorical strategies employed by political conservatives. We argue that the most prominent conservative reactions either undermined the potential for reasoned debate and a cohesive narrative regarding the causes of the attack or, by emphasizing Loughner’s agency as an individual, deranged actor, painted the event in a way that failed to provide transformative redemption, foreclosed even the possibility of a rhetorically satisfying sense of justice, and preempted what could otherwise have been a rich, deliberative deployment of civility. We utilize Kenneth Burke’s dramatism in speculating about possible alternative interpretations of the situation, hopeful that such an analysis might offer both the public and the government more effective rhetorical resources for dealing with and even preventing such increasingly common tragedies. In particular, we advocate the use of a hybrid, tragicomic frame—a sort of Burkean Serenity Prayer in which we accept the things we

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cannot change while still finding the inspiration, strength, and wisdom to respond productively—alongside a multifaceted set of pentadic ratios to address the complex demands created by mental illness.

On the morning of Saturday, January 8, 2011, Representative Gabrielle Giffords (D-AZ) and 18 others were shot by a lone gunman in a Safeway store parking lot in Tucson, Arizona, where Giffords was hosting an event for her constituents called “Congress on Your Corner.”1 In the space of 15 seconds, the killer sprayed over 30 bullets into the crowd from a Glock nine-millimeter pistol; six people died in the massacre before he was subdued, including a federal judge (John Roll), a member of Giffords’s staff (Gabe Zimmerman), and a nine-year-old girl (Christina-Taylor Green).2 The congresswoman, who appeared to have been the assassin’s primary target, was rushed to the hospital, a bullet having passed through her brain. Soon after the shooting, sources reported that she had in fact died from her wounds,3 but these reports were quickly supplanted by new information indicating that, although the injury was devastating, there was indeed hope for her recovery.4 Giffords survived the assault and, after months of physical therapy, slowly negotiated a return to public life, but the effects of the attack would reach far and wide—and linger—as a stunned nation struggled to cope with its horror.5

The event sparked a flurry of media coverage and speculation as to the assailant’s motives; indeed, a Pew Research Center study released just after the massacre found that the shooting was the third-largest news story during the four years they had tracked such data.6 Especially noteworthy, according to the Pew report, was the degree to which coverage crystallized around a single issue: the most prominent topic of the post-Tucson conversation (accounting for fully 57 percent of radio commentary, 32 percent of cable television discussion, 29 percent of online discourse, and 27 percent of coverage overall) was the issue of civility, and whether heated and divisive political rhetoric might have contributed to the incident.7

Such a moment of controversy provides insights into the fault lines that are defining the public and political spheres in the United States. Media pundits, elected officials, and citizens alike were invited to weigh in on the issues the event had brought to light, offering their perspectives as to what individuals, institutions, policies, or even ideological formations were responsible for the mayhem in Tucson; the result was a clash of dramas
offering competing characterizations of the victims, the perpetrator, the outside factors that may have contributed, and the lessons to be learned from the tragedy. These dramas tended to emerge along traditional partisan lines, with liberals accusing conservatives of propagating the “toxic” rhetoric and incivility that could incite such an attack, and conservatives, thrust into a position of having to defend themselves, pointing the finger of blame at any number of other sources.8

We argue that conservative responses to charges that their rhetorical practices may have contributed to the tragic events in Tucson ultimately posed a variety of complications, both for those on the right and for the country more generally. Specifically, our claim is that conservative responses to the massacre closed off rhetorical alternatives that would allow the nation collectively to take responsibility for, learn from, and work to prevent similar instances of violence in the future. Moreover, we suggest that the issue of mental illness uniquely shapes the problem of rhetorical justice and closure in cases like this, requiring concomitantly unique, sensitive, and agile responses from rhetors who would seek to ameliorate the effects of such horrors. In support of these arguments, we undertake a dramatistic analysis of the controversy, drawing upon the writings of Kenneth Burke.

Our essay begins with a brief overview highlighting the tools of dramatism that we would suggest offer the most illuminating perspective on the Tucson attack, introducing Burke’s pentad alongside his tragic and comic frames. Second, we analyze the rhetorical exigence surrounding the shooting—namely, the liberal accusations of incivility to which conservatives responded—and four themes advanced by those on the right as they defended themselves against these aspersions. Third, we critically evaluate these responses in light of Burke’s theoretical framework. Finally, we explore alternative responses to the violence that might better have served our society, particularly in cases such as this one where the mental state of the accused perpetrator becomes central to understanding the potential motivation for criminal acts.

KENNETH BURKE’S DRAMATISM

Kenneth Burke developed his dramatistic pentad to focus attention on what he characterized as the five key terms in an unfolding drama, allowing a
critic to make sense of the complex and interrelated elements making up human motivation (and, thus, action): a given act, the scene in which the act takes place, the agent performing the act, the agency with which the agent performs the act, and the purpose for which the act is carried out. Burke contended that this terminology quite literally—not metaphorically—describes the elements at play in any given human (purposive, symbolic) behavior.

For Burke, however, simply identifying the five elements of the pentad in some situation of interest was insufficient as an act of criticism. What he saw as most important, rather, were the nuanced ways in which the different elements of the pentad functioned in concert with one another. These relationships are what Burke called pentadic ratios, and they govern how certain features of the pentad either limit or lend themselves to certain other features. For example, in the scene-act ratio (describing the “container and thing contained”), a given scene—a typical middle-class setting” in Ibsen’s An Enemy of the People—“both realistically reflects the course of action and symbolizes it,” complementing a “representative middle-class drama” that makes a perfect sort of sense in such a context. The scene thus fits with, invites, and calls forth a specific type of action (or agent, or agency, or purpose). Conversely, Burke argued, it would be a challenge for individuals embedded in a “brutalizing” situation to be anything other than “as brutal as their scene,” since the setting serves as a “restriction upon” one’s potential “personality, or rôle.” Last, he reminded critics that, while those constructing appropriately “rounded” understandings of a situation would seek to take into account pentadic elements like scene, it ought be noted that the way each rhetor (or, for that matter, each ideology) defines that scene, or the relationships between the scene and other factors, might well vary; this, we would submit, is precisely the strength of Burke’s contribution. Indeed, Burke exhorted us to take advantage of these variances inasmuch as they shed light, seeking “not terms that avoid ambiguity, but terms that clearly reveal the strategic spots at which ambiguities necessarily arise.” In this spirit, we can use dramatistic tools to investigate how a single man’s behavior might be interpreted in different ways, by different rhetors, to different ends, with slippage across and through pentadic ratios.

One more borrowing from dramatistic theory is in order: Burke’s understanding of tragic and comic frames. In the simplest of terms, tragedy and comedy each provide lenses through which we can view the human condi-
tion. However, unlike his pentad, these perspectives represent various attitudes one might take in making sense of a given situation, rather than component pieces we can identify in his “grammar of motives.” The tragic frame is relatively fatalistic, the human drama playing out in the shadow of “the deus ex machina”; individuals may achieve Burkean redemption, but it is on a “cosmic” level, generally out of our hands as we simply play out the roles destined for us, and often occurs via destructive means—traditional forms of victimage such as scapegoating or mortification—rather than constructive ones. In contrast, Burke advocates for the sort of redemption—what we might call transformative redemption—that lies in the inherently “human” comic frame. In a comic reading, those in a disordered or chaotic situation may chastise an agent of disordered behavior, yet neither excommunicate nor condemn that agent for his or her actions. Instead, the comic frame allows for the agent in question to learn from his or her mistakes, experience enlightenment, and become a better person, reintegrated into what is now a stronger society, for undergoing such a trial. Undertaking such a process is redemptive on two levels. First, it allows the individual to be redeemed as a valid member of the community (rather than merely allowing the community to be absolved from guilt and thus redeemed by the destruction of the offending agent). Second, and more crucially, the comic frame also seeks to rectify the problematic characteristics of the agent that led to the initial pollution, thus protecting against future instances of the same chaos or misbehavior.

These particular dramatistic tools are fitting, we suggest, in studying the Tucson massacre: they allow a critic to analyze the different parts of the drama that played out as different parties sought to make sense of what precisely happened and, most importantly, the motivations driving this horrific act. The tools of tragic and comic framing further shed light on ways that individuals might work through the trauma by assigning responsibility, expiating guilt, and seeking some sort of redemptive closure.

In what follows, we outline first the liberal charges that, not only was the gunman accountable for the six lives lost (and the horror he inflicted on so many others), so too were conservative rhetors culpable for creating an environment that permitted and encouraged such an act. This, we submit, was a pentadic characterization clearly featuring the scene-act ratio. Then, we outline the predominant conservative responses to these claims, which
we argue offered a fragmentary attack that advanced along four unique fronts.

**RESPONDING TO TRAUMA**

*(LIBERAL) CHARGES OF (CONSERVATIVE) INCIVILITY*

Public comments about who was to blame for the violence in Tucson proliferated almost before the shooter’s gun stopped smoking. In a press conference held just after the incident, Pima County sheriff Clarence W. Dupnik—a personal friend of both Representative Giffords and Judge Roll—seemed to blame the massacre on the “vitriol that has permeated the political scene and left elected officials facing constant threats. And unfortunately Arizona, I think, has become sort of the capital, . . . the mecca for prejudice and bigotry.” Dupnik expressly blamed agents of the mass media for this state of affairs, suggesting, “I think it’s time as a country that we do a little soul-searching. Because I think it’s the vitriolic rhetoric that we hear day in and day out, from people in the radio business, and some people in the TV business . . . that this has not become the nice United States of America that most of us grew up in [sic].” He warned against this type of incivility, saying it “may be free speech, but it may not be without consequences.”

Others quickly echoed the sheriff’s comments, blaming the tragedy on an increasingly violent political atmosphere—one marked in particular by an enthusiastic swell of Tea Party rhetoric—in Giffords’s home state and, indeed, across America. For example, National Public Radio invited Andy Silverman, a law professor at the University of Arizona, to comment on what motivated the attack. Silverman explained, “Things in Arizona are very tense, and we’ve become the incubator for a lot of immigration-related matters and now for the birthers too.” Claims that the shootings were politically inspired were given further credibility as reporters went back to their archives to discover previous threats made against Giffords. A *New York Times* story, for instance, noted that “the windows of her office in Tucson were broken or shot out in an act of vandalism” following her vote in support of health care reform. The same report revealed that, “in August 2009, . . . a protester who showed up to meet Ms. Giffords at a supermarket event similar to [the site of the 2011 shootings] was removed
by the police when the pistol he had holstered under his armpit fell and bounced on the floor.”

Both Giffords and Judge Roll “had received numerous threats,” presumably tied to their politics. Insinuations of causality became stronger, with some claiming that such “inflammatory rhetoric draws real blood” and indicting the cultural milieu as much as the man who pulled the trigger; Alex Spillius observed, “The gunman will, before long, have his day in court, but for now the tenor of political rhetoric is in the dock.”

The tragedy at “Congress on Your Corner,” then, was painted as the logical, possibly predictable, even inevitable result of an increasingly hostile environment in Arizona and in America, marked not only by cases of physical violence but also by consistently vicious rhetorical assaults that merit our observation and concern.

Importantly, though many voices decried incivility in general, the nature of these critiques was decidedly partisan; one analysis of online commentary reported that 59 percent of social media discourse entailed liberals blaming conservatives for their rhetoric, in comparison to only 28 percent in which the Right defended themselves or cast blame back toward the Left. Two specific pieces of evidence emerged as particularly striking symbols of hateful rhetoric from the Right. First, MSNBC aired a film clip from 2009 in which Giffords, appearing on the network following the aforementioned case of office vandalism, voiced concern over the depiction of her district (with her name below it) in the crosshairs of a gun sight on a map created by special interest group sarahpac.com and distributed by Sarah Palin.

The map, which indicated congressional races conservatives should focus on if they were to win control of the House of Representatives, was swiftly circulated following the Tucson massacre along with commentary claiming that Palin bore at least some responsibility for the violence. Although the former vice-presidential candidate responded sorrowfully to the attack the same day it occurred, and would release a more thorough, self-defensive missive several days later in an apparent attempt to absolve herself of blame, the damage was already done: Palin may not have pulled the trigger, but many felt she had planted the seed or, if nothing else, set the stage for Loughner’s attack.

Second, it was revealed that Jesse Kelly, the Republican candidate whom Giffords had defeated in the most recent congressional election, had published an advertisement for a political event in June of the previous year in which he had encouraged supporters to “Get on Target for Victory in November Help remove Gabrielle Giffords from...
office Shoot a fully automatic M16 with Jesse Kelly [sic].” Alongside Palin’s crosshairs image, Kelly’s event (and specifically the invitation to it) stood as a clear example of violent conservative rhetoric that was explicitly aimed at Giffords and thus was, at least in part, responsible for creating an atmosphere legitimating behavior such as Loughner’s.

Although a number of liberal voices rose up in the wake of the attack to condemn conservative incivility like that of Palin and Kelly, we focus here on two highly visible rhetors on the left who took up the hue and cry with some fervor: Keith Olbermann, the left-leaning talk show host, and Paul Krugman, the liberal op-ed columnist for the New York Times. During his MSNBC broadcast on the evening of the shooting, Olbermann spoke powerfully of what he saw as the clear link between a conservative rhetoric of violence and the material violence that had unfolded in Tucson, calling on members of the Right to recognize and correct this tragic failure of discourse:

If Sarah Palin, whose website put and today scrubbed bullseye targets on 20 representatives including Gabby Giffords, does not repudiate her own part, however tangential, in amplifying violence and violent imagery in American politics, she must be dismissed from politics—she must be repudiated by the members of her own party, and if they fail to do so, each one of them must be judged to have silently defended this tactic that today proved so awfully foretelling, and they must in turn be dismissed by the responsible members of their own party.

Olbermann posed a similar challenge to members of the Tea Party movement:

If the Tea Party leaders who took out of context a Jefferson quote about blood and tyranny and the tree of liberty do not understand—do not understand tonight, now, what that really means, and these leaders do not tell their followers to abhor violence and all threat of violence, then those Tea Party leaders must be repudiated by the Republican Party.

In the same broadcast, Olbermann took to task a number of other Republicans he felt shared at least partial responsibility for “the black cloud of violence that has enveloped our politics”: Jesse Kelly, indicted for the M16
event mentioned above; Congressman Allen West (R-FL), who had told his followers “that they should make his opponent afraid to come out of his own home”; and Assemblywoman Sharron Angle of Nevada, “who spoke of ‘Second Amendment remedies’” to American political problems. The commentator also turned his fire on Glenn Beck and Bill O’Reilly, his conservative counterparts on Fox News, for their complicity in circulating messages that could be interpreted as condoning violence. He drew a line in the sand, inviting his audience to join him in his condemnation:

We as Americans—conservative or liberal—should pour our hearts and souls into our politics. We should not—none of us, not Gabby Giffords, not any conservative—ever have to pour our blood. And every politician and commentator who hints otherwise, or worse still stays silent now, should have no place in our political system, and should be denied that place, not by violence, but by being shunned and ignored.

Olbermann’s perspective on the Tucson massacre was echoed the following day when Paul Krugman declared that he was not surprised by the events in Arizona, and that he had in fact expected something like this to happen.34 Although Krugman, like many in the public sphere, clearly acknowledged “that the shooter in Arizona appears to have been mentally troubled,” he swiftly added, “That doesn’t mean that his act can or should be treated as an isolated event, having nothing to do with the national climate.” Krugman cited a report from the previous spring indicating “a surge in threats against members of Congress, which were already up by 300 percent.” Furthermore, he declared, “a number of the people making those threats had a history of mental illness—but something about the current state of America has been causing far more disturbed people than before to act out their illness by threatening, or actually engaging in, political violence.” Krugman seemed to have no doubts about what (or who) was to blame for this state of affairs:

It’s the saturation of our political discourse—and especially our airwaves—with eliminationist rhetoric that lies behind the rising tide of violence. Where’s that toxic rhetoric coming from? Let’s not make a false pretense of balance: it’s coming, overwhelmingly, from the right. It’s hard to imagine a Democratic member of Congress urging constituents to be “armed and
dangerous” without being ostracized; but Representative Michele Bachmann, who did just that, is a rising star in the G.O.P.

And there’s a huge contrast in the media. Listen to Rachel Maddow or Keith Olbermann, and you’ll hear a lot of caustic remarks and mockery aimed at Republicans. But you won’t hear jokes about shooting government officials or beheading a journalist at The Washington Post. Listen to Glenn Beck or Bill O’Reilly, and you will.

Krugman concluded his column with a series of provocative questions:

So will the Arizona massacre make our discourse less toxic? It’s really up to G.O.P. leaders. Will they accept the reality of what’s happening to America, and take a stand against eliminationist rhetoric? Or will they try to dismiss the massacre as the mere act of a deranged individual, and go on as before? If Arizona promotes some real soul-searching, it could prove a turning point. If it doesn’t, Saturday’s atrocity will be just the beginning.

Krugman’s closing questions are of natural interest to Burkean scholars: they grapple with classic dramatistic questions of guilt, disorder, purification, and agency. How, then, might such questions be answered? Clearly, the liberal commentators who addressed this issue assigned blame for the shootings in Tucson not just to the gunman but also (and possibly even more so) to the conservative politicians and media pundits who contributed to a political scene that was increasingly tolerant—if not outright encouraging—of those who would take violent measures to gain political power. In short, Olbermann, Krugman, and others understood the “brutal” act not simply as one carried out by a “brutal” man but as one that unfolded quite naturally within a “brutal” and “brutalizing” scene crafted by conservatives.35 Understandably, those on the right typically did not share this view. Instead, conservative responses to such accusations evinced a range of strategies that countered these liberal characterizations of the situation. We turn now to these reactions.

**CONSERVATIVE RESPONSES**

As was revealed in the days following the attack, liberal attempts to implicate conservative political views and media pundits in the Tucson violence
were met by swift and vociferous resistance from those on the right who had come under scrutiny. Some responses were ironic, closing off debate altogether by producing exemplars of exactly the sort of incivility that was under attack. (Consider, for example, Jonah Goldberg’s message to the media in August of 2011, as debates over the Giffords shooting dragged on: “Go to Hell. All of you.”) The majority of conservative responses, however, fell into four frequently interwoven categories: restructuring of issues by suggesting that liberals were obfuscating the issues at hand to gain political ground; denial of factual evidence; reversal of criticism, focusing on Loughner’s potential liberal influences; and—most prominently—pronounced focus on Loughner as a singularly responsible, yet incomprehensible, agent.

First, conservatives argued that liberal politicians and the liberal media were seeking, wrongly, to profit from this tragedy in an attempt to undermine and even silence the good people on the right, especially the patriotic followers of the Tea Party. In his “Talking Points” segment on Fox News, Bill O’Reilly protested “a disgusting display sweeping America,” featuring “the exploitation of the murders by political zealots.” He continued to lambaste what he called “the merchants of hate” for reactions that were not simply misguided but rather wildly inappropriate: “Only moments!—after Congresswoman Giffords was shot, some far-left loons began to spew their hatred [against] … Sarah Palin, Michele Bachmann, [and] Fox News.” Conservative blogger Joe Newby suggested that the liberal media overlooked more relevant factors (such as Loughner’s history or upbringing) and contended, “If liberals like Olbermann and Krugman had their way, conservatives would be stripped of their citizenship and tossed in concentration camps.” Rush Limbaugh warned his listeners, “Don’t kid yourself. What this was all about is shutting down any and all political opposition and eventually criminalizing … policy differences, at least when they differ from the Democrat Party agenda.” Indeed, he alleged that Democrats had drawn up gag legislation after the bombing in Oklahoma City and were waiting for the right moment to silence conservative voices; such gleeful opportunism in the wake of tragedy was, to Limbaugh, “embarrassingly, depressingly sick.” In another commentary, Limbaugh asserted that Democrats and Loughner were in collusion with one another and that the shooter would ultimately get off scot-free, positioned as just one more in “a never-ending parade of victims brought about by the
unfairness of America.” At the same time, talk show host Jon Justice criticized Sheriff Dupnik for being unforgivably unprofessional in suggesting that the attack was motivated by a particular discursive climate; in fact, he demanded that the sheriff resign at once.

Second, conservatives claimed, there was no evidence to indicate that the shooter was politically motivated. Fox’s Megyn Kelly, for example, critiqued Sheriff Dupnik for launching unfounded accusations, pointing out that his assertions had no basis in fact; this argument was echoed in an email circulated by “conservative public relations man Keith Appell.” Moreover, Fox News quickly publicized comments by Loughner’s former friend Zachary Osler, who had declared on Good Morning America that Loughner had “no political motive.” In fact, reported Osler, “He did not watch TV. He disliked the news. He didn’t listen to political radio. He didn’t take sides. He wasn’t on the left. He wasn’t on the right.” This was, then, a simple denial of the charge being launched by those on the left: conservatives argued either that there was no factual basis for liberals’ claims or that, on the contrary, the evidence that was available suggested there was no possible link between the rhetorical scene and Loughner’s murderous act.

These first two argumentative strategies were uniquely defensive in that, while they sought to defuse their liberal critics’ attacks, they also offered no alternative explanations for the events in Tucson that might compete with the dramatic narrative laid out by those on the left. The first strategy was jurisdictional, essentially refusing to engage in argument on the grounds that it was inappropriate to do so; the second simply sought to dismantle the causal link between scene and act. Two additional strategies, however, countered the Left’s rhetorical drama by offering competitive pentadic visions to more explicitly identify the contours of Loughner’s motivation, and thus help audiences make sense of the tragedy.

A third conservative strategy argued that, if Loughner was politically motivated, his politics were far left of center, not right. This strategy, then, adopted the same scene-act ratio that had been levied at conservatives by their critics on the left, but attempted to turn the tables: in this view, the scene that had called forth Loughner’s horrific act was a fundamentally liberal one. Rachel Alexander, a conservative blogger, quoted a former classmate who described Loughner as (when last she knew him some years prior), “left wing, quite liberal...a pot head.” As further evidence, Alexander noted that Loughner’s favorite books, as listed on his MySpace page,
included the *Communist Manifesto, Mein Kampf* (though how liberals get saddled with this selection is never satisfactorily explained), and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. In her conclusion she, like others on the right, recognized that Loughner was mentally unstable but also reoriented the finger of blame to point toward liberals and their politics:

Most likely the real story is that Loughner is a seriously disturbed individual who fits the profile of a psychopath and was motivated by a number of factors, none of them being conservative ideology. Did the values pushed by the left of moral relativism, self-indulgence, promoting acceptance of his imbibing of illicit drugs, and “tolerance” of hate-filled totalitarian books like The Communist Manifesto and Mein Kampf while dismissing the teachings of the Bible contribute to Loughner’s delusions? Perhaps.

Another conservative blogger made the same argument more forcefully: “This shooting is what they teach, this is the poisonous fruit of their indoctrination. Clearly, Loughner is sick, mentally ill—but suckling at the lefty teat is deadly poison for the soul. Loughner’s mental illness is as obvious as his leftism.” Ken Taylor argued by implication that Loughner’s behavior reflected standard left-wing political culture:

Every conservative gathering is peaceful, clean and patriotic as opposed to liberal gatherings which are always violent, create mounds of garbage and express loudly rhetoric which condemns America and blames our country for every evil taking place in the world while using the race card at every opportunity. But to the left WE are the evil, violent racists who can’t wait to commit an act of murderous violence to prove our political beliefs.

Finally, although others in the Tea Party movement simply expressed their sympathies in the wake of the attack, the Tea Party Nation explicitly blamed liberals for the shootings. A particularly heated missive from Judson Phillips, the group’s founder, urged his compatriots to remain stalwart in the face of what he (correctly) presumed would be an onslaught of accusations from those on the left. Though he wished all parties could simply “mourn for those killed by a liberal lunatic,” he averred that “political civility is long since dead and the left will not let us do this,” so instead his fellow Tea Partiers would need to defend themselves “with the simple truth”
that Loughner was “not only nuts, but also a card carrying liberal”—“a liberal lunatic. Emphasis on both words.”

The most common conservative response to the Tucson shootings, however, severed Loughner from any ideological influence; instead, as Krugman had warned they would, myriad voices on the right asserted not only that the shooter was solely responsible for his actions but that, because he was deranged, we could not and should not attempt to make sense of his motives. This was, in other words, an almost surgical isolation or localization of blame, declaring that Loughner’s motivations were either unknowable or inscrutable; in dramatistic terms, the act was bound to a single agent, while all other possible pentadic ratios (linking the act to, say, a particular scene or purpose, or even other agents in the scene) were neatly severed.

Fox News trumpeted shortly after the attack that the majority of Americans believed the shooting was “just a random act of violence by an unstable person,” not “the result of political anger in the country.” A potpourri of quotations from major conservative voices reaffirmed the perspective that Loughner’s actions could not be tied to any external element; for example, CNN reported that the Right’s position was essentially “that the Tucson incident involved a mentally unstable assailant rather than a symptom of lax gun control laws.” Former Bush White House spokesman Tony Fratto characterized the shooting as just “the act of one crazy person,” not a clear political move or part of some larger ongoing crisis. Senator Jon Kyl (R-AZ) suggested that “it’s probably giving him too much credit to ascribe a coherent political philosophy to [Loughner],” and “we just have to acknowledge that there are mentally unstable people in this country” who, without discernible motive, simply “commit terrible crimes like this.”

Sarah Palin’s Facebook posting several days after the shootings offered one of the most thorough articulations of this argument. Like others, Palin described the shootings as the work of “a single evil man.” Quoting Ronald Reagan, she contended, “We must reject the idea that every time a law’s broken, society is guilty rather than the lawbreaker. It is time to restore the American precept that each individual is accountable for his actions.” Then she offered her own version of this sentiment: “Acts of monstrous criminality stand on their own. They begin and end with the criminals who commit them.” In addition, she described Loughner as a “deranged” and “apparently apolitical criminal.”
Palin’s remarks reveal another common aspect of the strategy of localizing blame: name-calling or, more generally, labeling. Although many in the public sphere echoed Palin’s sentiment that the shooter was “evil,” there was also a strong tendency to focus on his mental instability, disparaging him as fundamentally (and unforgivably) outside the realm of normal cognitive functionality. O’Reilly called Loughner a “psychopath.”63 Juan Williams called him a “psycho nut-job.”64 To Ken Taylor, he was a “whacked out” and “crazed lunatic.”65 Speaking on Meet the Press, Representative Trent Franks (R-AZ) described him as “a deranged lunatic that had no respect for his fellow human beings and completely rejected any kind of constitutional foundation of this nation.”66 Fox News characterized the shooter as “clearly beyond the range of normal thinking and rationality” and prone to “wildly bizarre, perhaps psychotic ramblings.”67 Limbaugh described him as “insane,” “a nut,” and potentially the progeny of “derelicts”;68 moreover, noting Loughner’s alleged marijuana use, he asserted—without a shred of irony or self-reflection69—that “mental health issues like this [are] often caused by drug use.”70

Kenneth Burke wrote extensively on the power of naming throughout his work, observing, “All thought tends to name things not because they are precisely as named, but because they are not quite as named, and the name is designated as a somewhat hortatory device, to take up the slack.”71 Thus, the process of attributing these labels to Loughner did more than just describe him as evil and irrational: they in fact constituted him as such. These characterizations seemingly perfected Loughner, in the Burkean sense, as a villain character, the “‘perfect’ enemy.”72 However, in doing so, they also closed off the possibility that his actions might have been influenced by the rhetoric of the cultural scene; more generally, by banishing him to the realm of the irrational and incomprehensible, they limited their capacity to account for and respond to his actions. We will now critically assess each of the four conservative strategies outlined here, arguing why these approaches were insufficient.

**Conservative Shortcomings**

To summarize, we have thus far deployed a pentadic framework to examine the various dramatistic narratives in the discourse about the Tucson tragedy. We discovered that liberal interpretations of the massacre assigned
guilt by emphasizing what Burke calls the scene-act ratio. In this construction, a violent act was provoked (primarily) by a scene characterized by political incivility, vituperation, and the legitimization of violence as an appropriate response to political difference. While Jared Lee Loughner may have pulled the trigger that day (and while nearly everyone recognized that he probably was afflicted with a severe psychological disorder), the liberal perspective argued that he was not solely responsible for his actions; the purveyors of “toxic” rhetoric shouldered at least some of the blame.

While arguments from the Left were quite consistent, however, in that liberal arguers placed conservative rhetoric as the central, provocative, and defining feature of the scene, conservatives used a range of (sometimes incommensurate) strategies. Conservative responses sought to either avert the metaphorical trial altogether (on jurisdictional grounds, as in the first strategy), refute the liberals’ accusation by dismantling the causal scene-act link, reappropriate the scene-act ratio by blaming liberal ideologies for Loughner’s behavior, or—by claiming that the cause for Loughner’s violent acts was simply unknowable—locate motivation firmly and solely within an agent-act ratio.

Of course, each of these different tacks frames the trial in a fundamentally different way, thus rupturing the potential for a unified conservative argument—which is not, in and of itself, a damning criticism, but it may have made it more difficult for the Right as a whole to gain ground with an audience that naturally seeks narrative coherence.\(^73\) Without deploying a particularly sophisticated “even if” rhetoric, conservatives could not, for example, both avert a discussion of Loughner’s motives while also indicting liberal ideologies for their role in those motives, nor could they fully dismantle the scene-act relationship while also attempting to wield it against their liberal critics. Coming from another angle, attempts to blame Democratic ideology and rhetoric (or other external influences such as music, books, and conspiracy theories) by their nature acknowledged the potential power of the scene to influence the shooter’s actions. If these elements of the scene shaped the killer’s act, however, then how could those on the right argue that other features inherent to the scene—namely, conservatives’ own incendiary messages—were not also at least partially culpable? We highlight these potential contradictions not to point out how any one conservative rhetor was espousing incommensurate positions, nor do we mean to imply that all members of a political group must occupy a united rhetorical front
in responding to critics; instead, we would simply suggest that this multi-
pronged defense strategy may ultimately have weakened conservatives’
potential to offer a singular, coherent, powerful narrative as those on the left
seem to have done.

We also recognize that many of the most prominent voices on the right
avoided these possible contradictions altogether by focusing solely on the
fourth strategy identified here: characterizing the attack in terms of the
agent-act ratio, a feature that previous research suggests we might expect to
find in paradigmatic conservative discourse. However, we would argue
that this tactic of emphasizing the agent-act ratio, while offering greater
potential for successfully identifying and containing guilt (since it was easy
to agree that Loughner was a villain), nonetheless fell short of offering a
compelling and satisfying explanation for the incident, particularly in light
of Burke’s frames.

Recall that, for Burke, the comic frame represented a “corrective” for
critics, a more fundamentally valuable perspective allowing a community
and its members to work through a crisis and become better for it. Conservatives’ focus on Loughner as the sole agent responsible for the
shootings, however, rendered the comic frame unavailable to arguers on the
right. Simply put, medical assessments of Loughner indicated that he had a
profoundly ruptured sense of rationality, in that he suffered from schizo-
phrenia as well as delusional and disordered thinking. As numerous
voices in the public and technical spheres opined (including Sheriff
Dupnik), the trial would likely come down to basic questions regarding the
young man’s competence and ability to comprehend the difference between
right and wrong, since his role in the shootings was well documented by
eyewitnesses and confirmed by his own admissions. Note, as well, that
conservative rhetors themselves drove home the argument that Loughner
was unsuitable as a rational (comic) agent by reminding us time and again
how “crazy” he was (through the variety of epithets cited above); thus,
Loughner was systematically denied status as a rational being and was
therefore not eligible for the transformative capacity of the comic frame
(which celebrates the human agent’s ability to think, learn, and change on
his or her own, without divine intervention). Had conservatives recognized
their own role as coagents contributing to the scene and, concomitantly, to
the act, then perhaps they could have taken on the role of the chastised actor,
transformed and redeemed within the comic frame. However, by holding
firm to their contention that Loughner was the singular locus of blame, conservatives had no viable candidates for a comic figure with the capacity to learn from mistakes and move on.

The only frame available to conservative arguers was a tragic frame, but even reading Loughner’s story in the context of Burkean tragedy fails to provide the functional closure that the tragic process of guilt purification ostensibly provides. For Burke, tragedy is not as ideal or well-rounded a frame as the comic, but it nonetheless can serve an important societal function by containing and punishing polluting forces, allowing for at least the semblance of a return to greater societal order. Here, rationality or agency is less relevant; all that matters is that sin (and guilt) can be thoroughly transferred onto the vessel of a scapegoat who is then appropriately punished (or destroyed), thereby removing this neatly contained tumor of evil from society.

In some ways, all the elements were lined up properly to vilify Loughner within a tragic frame: he was portrayed as incomprehensible to the common rational person (almost as if he were possessed by some deeper, cosmic evil), with actions that were inevitable—or at least predictable, following what 60 Minutes called a “well-worn path on his final descent into madness”78—given the long history of his aberrant behavior identified by more than a dozen friends, classmates, and even the public safety reports from his community college.79 If Loughner could be appropriately vilified and then punished, then the expurgation of his guilt through what Burke called the “Cult of the Kill” could be fully realized.80 However, the determination that Loughner was not just evil but also mentally ill undermined his potential as a scapegoat on a number of fronts.

Certainly, there is a large body of religious discourse weighing in on whether those who are mentally ill are in fact morally culpable for their behaviors (and thus guilty of sin); similar controversies have spilled over into secular evaluations of morality, as well, inasmuch as judicial doctrine continues to grapple with how best to deal with those who may not be operating according to standard principles of reason.81 As the New York Times summarized, if Loughner is insane, he suddenly becomes “a step removed from being responsible for his actions,” leaving him in a sort of limbo with respect to his guilt and the legal system’s concomitant judgment against him.82 More formally, such assessments have become legally codified in the insanity defense and associated verdicts: “not guilty by reason of
insanity” or “guilty but insane.” Each of these judgments reflects the uncertain, qualified nature with which we assess guilt in the context of mental instability. Although Loughner’s trial ultimately did not invoke any of these ambiguous legal labels, we would suggest that uncertainties regarding the relationship between guilt and mental illness were still very much at play. All told, Loughner pled guilty to 19 federal charges in a plea agreement that sentenced him to seven consecutive life terms, followed by 140 years in prison without the possibility of parole. The agreement was reached after a judge ruled that Loughner was able to understand the charges against him; notably, however, this determination was only reached after the defendant “was diagnosed with schizophrenia and underwent forcible psychotropic drug treatments.”83 While the verdict did provide some degree of closure for the case, and it spared the victims the need to sit through a painful trial, the question remains whether such a conclusion really offered a rhetorically and morally satisfying expiation of guilt. Although the law may allow such judgment of the clinically insane, we would argue that such a finding is imperfect, not only in the sense that the punishment itself is arguably unfair when ordered against someone who may not have been able to control his own behavior but also in that it rhetorically excuses (or at least explains) the guilt by suggesting that the accused was not participating in the same moral or social order as his peers, accusers, and victims. At this point, then, Loughner is no longer an acceptable scapegoat; in other words, we contend, if Loughner was unable to even comprehend the nature of the crime at the time it occurred, his guilt is not total, and thus punishing him cannot fully account for the pollution at hand.

Moreover, the moral sanctity of those meting out punishment quickly comes under scrutiny in such cases; serious questions arise about how appropriate it is to medicate someone so that they can regain competence only to then threaten (or even pursue) a death penalty verdict in a murder trial.84 Even if Loughner had regained competence on his own, there are still complex issues of morality surrounding the condemnation of a newly reasonable man for the actions he undertook when delusional: can we justifiably execute Dr. Jekyll for the actions of Mr. Hyde? As Richard Bonnie, the director of the Institute of Law, Psychiatry and Public Policy at the University of Virginia, has observed in reaction to crimes such as this, “there are some cases where a person was so mentally disturbed at the time
of the offense that it would be inhumane and morally objectionable to convict and punish them.”

Thus, not only is the comic frame unavailable to the irrational or delusional agent, even the justice system we rely on for a satisfying identification and punishment of a tragic villain is more or less undermined in the case of a mentally ill (or, perhaps more accurately, mentally incompetent) scapegoat, thereby denying the public this rhetorical fulfillment of the guilt-purification cycle. Granted, we could choose to abandon any efforts to transform or apply standard processes of justice in cases involving a mentally ill agent; we could, in short, give up hope for either tragic or comic redemption and instead accept that there are some horrors in the world that we cannot, and should not try to, understand. Indeed, we recognize that, especially for conservatives, this sort of resignation without redemption may be a perfectly acceptable response to the tragedy in Tucson.

There remains one core problem, however, with the conservative emphasis on agent over scene—one that we find too worrisome to ignore. Such an emphasis, by obfuscating our own roles as fellow agents, builders of a scene, or providers of agency—even caretakers, as the case may be, of the mentally ill—forecloses our ability to learn, grow from such a tragedy, and take active steps to prevent such a crisis from being repeated. Turning to a more speculative use of Burkean dramatism, then, we might well ask ourselves the following questions: what alternatives to this flawed pentadic arrangement ( privileging the “mentally ill agent”—act ratio) might we explore, and, more importantly, which of these alternatives might we prefer as we seek to move toward a safer, better, more stable society?

**ALTERNATIVE VISIONS OF TRAGEDY: “OUT OF CHAOS BREATHE CREATION”**

Bearing in mind the shortcomings of conservative responses, but also remaining wary of a too-quick embrace of the liberal scene-act ratio, we face now an opportunity to craft a new drama to explain and move past the Tucson tragedy.

One alternative might be the widely applauded strategy of transcendence that President Obama employed during his memorial address for the victims of the shooting. During his speech, Obama avoided the trap of partisanship by granting the tragic ground that no one could truly know the
cause of the evil that had occurred in Tucson (thus performing a concilia-
tory function by dismantling the exigence for conservative defensiveness) to
open up the comic ground that renders us all responsible for bettering
ourselves in the wake of such a tragedy. Put another way, “by absolving the
right from blame, he made it impossible for them to shut out his larger
message.”

While such a move was appropriate and likely necessary for Obama, we
might question whether such transcendent rhetoric does enough in the way
of equipping us to respond as productively as possible to crises like that
exemplified by the Giffords shooting. How can we, for example, ade-
quately identify and call out acts of harmful rhetoric if nobody is to blame?
Can there even be redemption without the assignment of guilt? Does this
blind eye turned toward a problem and its causes undermine our outlining
of an appropriate solution? Is it enough to call for better behavior without
any condemnation or punishment for bad behavior? While recognizing the
value of Obama’s approach, then, we would suggest a corrective against a
wholesale embrace of this sort of transcendent discourse that refuses to lay
blame and instead responds only to some unclear and partial conceptual-
ization of a problem; to achieve transformative redemption in a well-
rounded frame, we must be willing to—when the opportunity provides
itself, as it may not have for Obama—both assign and accept blame.

When mental illness enters the picture, however, it seems an additional
corrective to standard Burkean thinking may be necessary. In such cases,
the question of responsibility is thorny and, ultimately, may prevent people
from easily reaching a consensus on how to assign guilt. Strong cultural
commitments to personal freedom and agency, particularly in the wake of
Reagan-era policies regarding the mentally ill, make it conceptually trou-
blesome and pragmatically difficult to assert that the state or lawmakers
have a (paternalistic) duty to take over agency on behalf of a disabled
individual—nor should such agents be held entirely responsible for the
often unpredictable acts of the ill, impaired, or disturbed, just as we would
not hold them accountable for acts of nature or God. More specifically, we
would be loath to suggest a return to the eugenics-inflected policies that
systematically deny agency to those deemed incompetent or incapable
(even when such policies are well intentioned and supported by prevailing
cultural logics that justify the state’s adoption of a “custodial” role), result-
ing in horrors such as forced sterilization and lobotomies; this is dangerous
Nevertheless, an absolute, tragic refusal to take on any responsibility for those who are somehow disabled seems overly fatalistic, even heartless (and hopeless) in its foreclosure of compassionate care for those who need it, as well as its refusal to mitigate the harm caused by persons like Loughner. Moreover, as we have seen in the Loughner case and others that are similar, it is problematic and morally distasteful to simply condemn someone who cannot access standard faculties of rationality. If they cannot be held accountable, then, who can be? Is there a way we can balance our aversion to paternalism with a compassionate and proactive response to individuals who may in fact need our care and active involvement? Alternatively, is there a way we can balance a respect for immanent human agency with a commitment to protecting the overall community against unpredictable trauma?

For such situations, we suggest a second corrective: a hybrid frame (incidentally, a more advanced form of that which Obama implicitly invoked) that encompasses both tragedy and comedy, victimage and mortification, while avoiding rhetorical myopia and striving for the well-rounded frame that, we feel, Burke champions. Importantly, with this move we make not only practical claims but also theoretical ones, challenging the seeming superiority of the comic frame that has presided throughout interpretations of Burke. At least in cases of mental illness, we would submit that perhaps the most well-rounded perspective can only be achieved by strategic incorporation of both tragic and comic elements and by utilizing a balanced pentadic image that takes into account agent alongside coagent, scene, and agency.92

Let us explore what such a balanced rhetorical frame might look like. In situations where there are no easy explanations for motive, there is an element of tragedy that can be valuable, even necessary, to acknowledge for those who suffer and society at large to move past trauma. It is this element that the Reverend Janet Vincent, from St. Columba’s Episcopal Church, seemed to tease out of Obama’s address, commenting, “What I most resonated with was his saying that our nature is to want to make sense out of chaos, and in this case, we can’t make sense out of it. And I think he helps us on our way to healing in acknowledging that.”93 Of course, resigning ourselves to a purely tragic interpretation of meaningless chaos can lead to what Mark Potok characterizes as the “straw man argument on the right” in which, since we cannot account for the motives of a disordered individual,
we must discount all structural explanations for his or her actions. Thus, we can infuse a comic corrective into this tragic acceptance: without simply finding an alternative scapegoat (and ironically contributing to the incivility we seek to avoid), we can expand our pentadic scope to identify other potential causes and solutions, including those for which we ourselves can take responsibility. We temper our judgment with humility, a sentiment profoundly articulated by the Reverend Al Sharpton who, invoking a tragic sense of Burkean mortification alongside a comic one of social support and transformation, suggested that the very root of civility is in a recognition of our own flaws and sins, along with our need for others to help us rise above them.

Sharpton’s observation helps us to bring our discussion full circle. If the question that gripped the nation immediately following the massacre in Tucson revolved around whether incivility was to blame for the attack, we now face a slightly different question: whether civility in its wake can help us heal from its wounds and prevent such tragedies in the future. We would argue that what is needed is not simply an enactment of “civility” in the sense of “decorum” but rather something more: a dialectical tension between frames and pentadic elements that keeps us in check, a sort of Burkean Serenity Prayer in which we balance tragic acceptance of the things we cannot change—such as the disordered behavior of a disabled agent—with the comic courage to forgive and change the things we can—such as our own role as coagents, elements within the scene, or access to agency.

Put another way, this encourages us to identify and make amends for our own responsibilities and shortcomings as coagents caring for one another (as both Keith Olbermann and John McCain, laudably, did), without either scapegoating or self-flagellating to excess. Such a dialectical stance also allows us to neatly weave together private and public solutions to proactively address the crisis at hand, taking advantage of unique (if painful) opportunities for systemic change in scene and agency; in Loughner’s case, rhetors might self-reflectively evaluate their own rhetorical choices but also consider policy changes in terms of mental health care and access to guns. Incidentally, this then serves to answer the plaintive calls for action voiced by Reverend Sharpton, former New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani, and others.

To be clear, some have already advocated a (partial) version of this hybrid tragicomic stance, as may be evident from some of the voices we have cited.
In addition, politicians—both on the left and on the right—asked for and proposed legislation in the immediate aftermath of the Tucson shooting, as well as after similar attacks such as the 2012 massacre in Newtown, Connecticut, to prevent such tragedies from recurring; such proposals generally did a good job of accounting for multiple pentadic loci in assessing responsibility for the event. Our point is not that such proactive responses are never invoked. Our contribution is, rather, to offer our fellow scholars food for thought in terms of interpreting this particular event and making sense of Burke’s frames. Moreover, we wish to open a discussion of ways in which a single Burkan frame, or even a single pentadic ratio, may not provide us with suitable “equipment for living” in complex cases such as those involving mental instability and public violence. Most importantly, we wish to suggest a way that all these different elements at play in various corners of the public sphere might be united in a cohesive rhetorical strategy of redemption and transformative response: a tragicomic, more fully pentadic vision of civility.

We can, in closing, consider the quotation that we have featured in the title of this essay: “out of chaos breathes creation.” It has been reported that this was Jared Lee Loughner’s favorite quote, and in light of the horrors that it evidently inspired him to manifest, it is admittedly with some reservation that we reproduce the sentiment here. However, it also seems somehow fitting, in light of our argument, that we take his rhetoric, facing it head-on and then investigating or tinkering with it to see how it might serve our own ends. There is a distinctly Burkan sentiment to the phrase. It evokes the inherent disorder Burke recognized as a core feature of human existence, as well as his call for a productive, comic corrective that favors creation and progress (including the reinvention of self and the proliferation of active solutions) over destruction and debunking. We thus reappropriate Loughner’s motto in our attempt to find a path forward, seeking what inspiration we can find in the depths of such trauma.

NOTES

1. In reporting the general facts of the shooting, we rely on our analysis of dozens of reports from a range of sources, citing specific references for information that was less widely reported or that merits specific quotation.
2. Although many who spoke about the young girl in the aftermath of the tragedy (including President Obama) referred to her as “Christina,” we defer to the hyphenated form of her first name used by her family.


7. Jurkowitz, “Special Report.” Indeed, as Jurkowitz’s summary revealed, conversation about “the tenor of political discourse in America, including its role as a potential catalyst for the tragedy,” was responsible for more coverage than “the alleged shooter . . . and his family” and even “straight news accounts of the shooting and its aftermath,” implying that the public was in fact more interested in reflecting on the role of rhetoric than in probing the facts about the assault or the shooter.


10. See, for example, Burke, “Dramatism,” 11.


14. Burke, *Grammar of Motives*, xvii; see also the second portion of the book, where he maps different pentadic elements onto various schools of thought.


17. See, of course, Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*.


22. Murphy and Mehta, “6 Die in Tucson Rampage.”

23. Halloran, “‘Vitriol’ Cited.”


25. Lacey and Herszenhorn, “Political Repercussions.”

26. Lacey and Herszenhorn, “Political Repercussions.”

29. Giffords’s MSNBC interview is cited in, for example, Halloran, “‘Vitriol’ Cited”; for Palin’s map, see Xeni Jardin, “Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords Shot in Arizona, Was on Palin’s Infamous ‘Target’ Map (Updated),” Boing Boing, January 8, 2011, http://boingboing.net/2011/01/08/congresswoman-gabrie.html (accessed February 18, 2014). For more on the crosshairs map and Giffords’s response, including additional citations, see Beth L. Boser and Randall A. Lake, “‘Enduring’ Incivility: Sarah Palin and the Tucson Tragedy,” in this volume; see, in particular, note 7 for additional citations pertaining to Palin’s map, and note 9 for Giffords’s reaction.
32. Jardin, “‘Target’ Map.”
33. All citations in this paragraph refer to Keith Olbermann, “Special Comment,” Countdown, January 8, 2011, http://www.nbcnews.com/id/40981503/ns/msnbc_tv-countdown_with_keith_olbermann/ (accessed February 18, 2014); we quote the video directly, although a slightly divergent transcript is also offered at this site.
34. All citations in this paragraph refer to Krugman, “Climate of Hate.”
35. See Burke, Grammar of Motives, 9.
2011/01/10/an_embarrassment_for_the_media_and_sick_desperate_american_left (accessed February 18, 2014).

41. Limbaugh, “Embarrassment for the Media.”


44. Mirkinson, “Megyn Kelly.”


49. Alexander, “The Left.”

50. Alexander, “The Left.”

52. Ken Taylor, “Gifford Shooting an Attack against Americans Not Conservative Politics as Left Claims,” RedState, January 9, 2011, http://www.redstate.com/diary/ken_taylor/2011/01/09/gifford-shooting-an-attack-against-americans-not-conservative-politics-as-left-claims/ (accessed February 18, 2014). See also “Gabrielle Giffords Shooting: Don’t Blame Sarah Palin, Blame Jerod [sic] Loughner (Who If Anything Is a Leftist),” Start Thinking Right, January 8, 2011, http://startthinkingright.wordpress.com/2011/01/08/gabrielle-giffords-shooting-dont-blame-sarah-palin-blame-jerod-loughner-who-if-anything-is-a-leftist/ (accessed February 18, 2014). It is worth noting, as well, that some conservative rhetors also employed a sort of *tu quoque* argument by pointing out cases in which the Left had employed rhetorical tactics similar to the conservative strategies that had come under fire, including Democrats’ own versions of “crosshairs” and “targeting” symbolism; the claim, ostensibly, was that these liberal messages were just as likely to have inspired Loughner’s violence as any conservative discourse was, or perhaps even more so. For examples of this line of reasoning, see again “Don’t Blame Sarah Palin,” as well as James Rosen, “Arizona Massacre Prompts Political ‘Cheap Shots,’” Fox News, January 10, 2011, http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2011/01/10/arizona-massacre-prompts-political-cheap-shots/ (accessed February 18, 2014).


56. Krugman, “Climate of Hate.”

57. Note the distinction between this strategy and the second conservative response we have outlined above. This tactic goes beyond simply asserting that the pentadic relationship did not function in the way liberals had claimed; it also goes beyond a simple denial of factual support for that pentadic relationship, which still allows for some possible version of that relationship to be valid, given proper evidence. Instead, this move entirely closes off the possibility that we could ever conceivably characterize the motives of the shooter, shutting down any possible exploration of (or reaction to,
or tweaking of) pentadic ratios other than the insulated and infrangible bond between the agent and his act.


61. Terkel, “Clarence Dupnik.”

62. For all citations in this paragraph, see Palin, “America’s Enduring Strength.”

63. Powers, “Bill O’Reilly.”

64. Rosen, “Political ‘Cheap Shots.’”

65. Taylor, “Attack against Americans.”


68. Limbaugh, “Embarrassment for the Media.”

69. On October 10, 2003, Rush Limbaugh admitted that he was addicted to prescription painkillers after police began investigating the talk show host in connection with “a black market drug ring in Palm Beach County, Florida,” where it was suspected that he may have been purchasing the drugs OxyContin and hydrocodone; he then entered a drug rehabilitation program to treat his addiction. See “Limbaugh Admits Addiction to Pain Medication,” CNN, October 11, 2003, http://edition.cnn.com/2003/SHOWBIZ/10/10/rush.limbaugh/index.html (accessed February 18, 2014).

70. Limbaugh, “Embarrassment for the Media.”

71. Burke, Grammar of Motives, 54.


73. On coherence in narrative, see Walter R. Fisher’s classic work, especially Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action
(Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1987) for a particularly complete version of his argument.

74. For arguments regarding conservatives’ tendency to focus on agent as the primary pentadic feature characterizing a situation, see Bernard L. Brock, “A Definition of Four Political Positions and a Description of Their Rhetorical Characteristics” (Ph.D, diss., Northwestern University, 1965), esp. 347–48. Brock’s analysis also supports the observations we make here regarding liberal rhetors’ focus on scene; see, in particular, Brock, “Four Political Positions,” 348–49.

75. Burke, *Attitudes toward History*.


81. We are deeply thankful to Stephen O’Leary and L. Paul Strait for their thoughtful and detailed comments regarding this issue, which helpfully informed our argument here.

82. Barry, “Mug-Shot Grin.”


86. We are grateful to David Zarefsky for drawing our attention to this argument.
90. Again, on this point, see Frank, “Facing Moloch”; Stuckey and O’Rourke, “Civility, Democracy, and National Politics”; and Amsden, “Dimensions of Temporality.”
92. See, as well, Francesca Marie Smith, “Finding Paths through Chaos: Alcoholics Anonymous and the Search for Salvation at the Crossroads of Religion, Human
Agency, and the Medical Model” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Communication Association, Orlando, FL, November 15–18, 2012) for related arguments applied to alcoholics.


97. See Stuckey and O’Rourke, “Civility, Democracy, and National Politics,” for a thorough discussion of civility and decorum. See, as well, Don Waisanen, “Toward Robust Public Engagement: The Value of Deliberative Discourse for Civil Communication,” Rhetoric & Public Affairs 17 (2014): 287–322; though Waisanen’s piece was not yet made available to us as we constructed our arguments here, we find it noteworthy that his perspective aligns neatly with the idea of a “deliberative deployment of civility” that we articulate in our abstract.


99. The move for more robust mental health care solutions is rendered especially poignant in considering that Loughner, some months after the attack and after undergoing psychiatric treatment, reported “that he wished he had been taking anti-psychotic medication for years and has said the shooting might not have happened if he had”; Marc Lacey, “Tucson Shooting Suspect to Have More Treatment,” New York Times, September 28, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/29/us/loughner-makes-court-appearance.html (accessed February 18, 2014). Of course, such a statement might well be taken with a grain of salt, for it
raises a plethora of questions—as to Loughner’s sincerity, as to whether treatment would have helped, as to whether and which policy solutions would have resulted in his receiving treatment, and so on—but, importantly, it also raises another, more compelling question: what if?

100. “Meet the Press’ Roundtable.”


104. Burke, *Philosophy of Literary Form,* 293–304.

