

RESEARCH

"I Can Spin Some Bullshit If You Want": Narrating (and Bridging?) The Civil-Military Divide in Phil Klay's *Redeployment*

Tim Gauthier

University of Nevada, Las Vegas, US

tim.gauthier@unlv.edu

In Phil Klay's fiction, the telling of one's tale is fraught with personal peril. Exposing one's actions to the scrutiny and possible condemnation of others is a difficult task requiring the embracing of one's own vulnerability. This trepidation, combined with a strong suspicion that one will be misunderstood, creates conditions where miscommunication is more likely to occur than not. This tenuous dynamic explains the ambivalent stance towards narrative adopted by Klay's veteran-narrators in *Redeployment* – perhaps best reflected in their repeated use of the word "bullshit" (over a dozen times) in a variety of instances throughout the collection. Examining three stories from the collection – "Bodies," "War Stories," and "Psychological Operations" – I consider the extent to which Klay's invocation of "bullshit" announces that one carries no illusions about the truth-bearing quality of one's narrative and that one is subsequently seeking a different kind of contract with the listener. In Klay's stories, then, bullshit acts as both a defense mechanism and an instigation. Urging the reader to truly listen, Klay seeks to open new avenues for civil-military connection and an acceptance of mutual responsibility.

Keywords: Klay; Redeployment; civil-military; reintegration; responsibility; empathy

"I COULD never imagine what you've been through," she said.

So begins an essay by Phil Klay highlighting the thought processes that hamper the possibility of meaningful connection between civilian and veteran. The speaker is a woman who has suffered unspeakable abuse during her childhood, but yet declares an inability to conceive of Klay's wartime experiences. For his part, he contends that she is more than equipped to understand, since their respective traumas actually provide common ground on which to build this understanding: "[S]he knew feelings of shocked numbness far better than I did," Klay tells us (2014, *After War*). The woman, however, refuses to engage in such an exercise out of respect for his experiences; she does not wish to presume (or be perceived to presume) to know what he has gone through. This refusal to imagine, Klay contests, contributes to the divide separating veteran from civilian. He further argues that while veterans must overcome their reluctance to speak of the horrors, civilians have an obligation to use their imaginations to picture that which the veterans struggle to depict: "Believing war is beyond words

is an abrogation of responsibility – it lets civilians off the hook from trying to understand, and veterans off the hook from needing to explain" (2014, *After War*). When civilians proclaim they "cannot imagine," Klay argues, they systematically shut themselves off from the veteran's experience. Furthermore, civilians fail to consider what they consent to, and what they are responsible for, when they send these individuals off to war.

Klay's essay is, among other things, a plea for empathy. In other words, veterans are not so much interested in the audience *knowing* what they went through (though that is no doubt part of it), as they are in the audience *feeling* what they went through: "listen to their story and try to imagine being in it," Klay urges, "no matter how hard or uncomfortable that feels" (2014, *After War*). As we shall see, listening is the primary action sought by veterans in telling their stories. Listening in and of itself is an acknowledgment of the other. Whether this turns into a deeper interaction is not always the veteran's main concern. Through listening, the civilian is obliged to confront (if only momentarily) that which the veteran committed in his or her name. Such engagement, however, is not without its challenges. The motivations for telling the story

(*the narrative desire*) can alter as easily as the listener's reasons for attending and responding (*the desire for narrative*). Given these circumstances, is it possible to find common ground – to bridge the civil-military divide – through such interactions? This essay examines three stories from Klay's collection in order to illuminate various instances of bullshit and bullshitting that appear throughout the text. Readings of "Bodies" and "War Stories" reveal a wide-ranging set of narratorial strategies when the veteran utilizes or invokes bullshit. In "Psychological Operations," Klay dramatizes the conditions required for the participants to find a reciprocal space wherein the veteran's experiences might be told, and the listener's shared responsibility acknowledged. The story nevertheless presents a space fraught with precarity, confrontation, and widely differing perspectives; it proposes a dialogical experiment that tests the limits of telling and its corresponding act of listening.

The goal is some form of rapprochement, even if Klay's stories often betray a lack of faith in such a possibility. For though the author dramatizes situations within which veteran and civilian are placed in immediate contact, the results suggest the divide is a long way from being breached. In "Home Fires," an essay written for the *New Yorker*, George Packer (2014) specifically addresses the problematics of this divide: "Both sides of the relationship, if they were being honest, felt its essential falseness" (Packer).¹ In other words, because civilians no longer have any "skin in the game," so to speak, it matters little to them whether these wars end or not (apart from the paying of taxes). And yet there remains a kind of civil obligation to recognize, if only fleetingly (at baseball games and other communal events), the service provided by this now-alienated group. Relatedly, William J. Bartolomea (2015) notes that many civilians behave as though "serving (and protecting, fighting, and maybe dying) is someone else's burden" (10). Additionally, civilians have such limited exposure to military life that their flawed assumptions are permitted to blossom unfettered. As Klay tells one interviewer: "Only a small percentage of the population serves, and so those mythologies, whether about idealized heroes, or passively-suffering and possibly dangerous victims ... don't get checked by reality as often" (Rubenstein). These "mythologies" inevitably serve as an obstacle to understanding.

Each side thus feels compelled to play their roles; civilians pretend to care more than they do, and veterans pretend they fought and sacrificed for the people back home. But Packer's intermediate clause adds another layer to our understanding of civil-military interactions. It suggests that each side is more or less aware of the charade being played, and thus has some sense of what they are repressing. Klay invokes bullshit as a means of acknowledging this falseness and establishing a space wherein some connection might be effected and an admission of mutual responsibility (complicity?) might be entertained. To arrive at this point of connection, the civilian must first overcome the urge to demarcate the veteran as different. As Packer (2014) notes, "Because hardly anyone back home really wanted to know,

the combatant's status turned into a mark of otherness, a blessing and a curse" (Packer). Any mutuality between veteran and civilian is lost. And, indeed, the struggle lies in getting civilians to recognize that the veteran is not quite as "other" as he or she has been made out to be. As such, it is this "mark of otherness" that Klay's characters often seek to modify or calibrate. The veteran's difference, therefore, is an intrinsic part of *Redeployment*, as each narrator (through dialogic engagement) seeks to connect with his audience (all of Klay's narrators are male) or, at the very least, elicit some understanding of how his otherness has been, and continues to be, constituted.² Indeed, Klay's narrators often seek to erase difference, thereby highlighting civil-military sameness in the process. Often, in fact, the veteran is engaged in "hailing" the civilian. Nancy Sherman (2015) similarly observes that the veteran seeks "a way of holding another to account, of demanding respect, of calling out another for due attention and recognition as part of a shared moral community" (26). Only through a recognition of mutual responsibility, as we shall see, can such a space be established.

This tenuous dynamic goes some way to explaining the ambivalent and conflicted stance of some of Klay's veteran-narrators – reflected, for instance, in their use of the word "bullshit" in a variety of forms throughout *Redeployment*.³ Through the declaration of bullshit, the teller self-consciously highlights his struggle to communicate the essence of his experience – in the process, admitting his reliance on half-truths, fictions, and assorted generalities. Signaling the presence of bullshit also alerts the listener (and, by extension, the reader) that the narration has shifted to a potentially neutral, though ambiguous, terrain wherein the teller-listener contract might be renegotiated. In other words, in proclaiming bullshit, the narrator simultaneously acknowledges the falseness of the civil-military relationship while creating a space wherein the nature of that relationship might be addressed.

Such victories, as many have noted, are not easily won. The opening sentences of Klay's "Bodies," for instance, illuminate the tensions surrounding the telling (and anticipated reception) of war stories. The narrator tells the listener:

For a long time I was angry. I didn't want to talk about Iraq, so I wouldn't tell anybody I'd been. And if people knew, if they pressed, I'd tell them lies.⁴

The narrator admits to two things in this opening passage – anger and dishonesty. The second admission – that he tells falsehoods – highlights the chasm separating veteran and civilian. It will be easier for both parties, the narrator assumes, if he lies. This distancing strategy is further compounded by the alterations he performs, depending on the gender of his listener. If the audience is male, he tells us, he frames the tale as a black comedy; if the audience is female, it is tragedy. In either case, the truth has been transformed through his stylistic choices.

At the same time, it is worth pausing to consider what the narrator considers "lies," because these are not complete falsehoods as his invocation of bullshit makes clear:

What I liked about the story was that even if it had happened, more or less, it was still total bullshit. After our deployment there wasn't anybody, not even Corporal G, who talked about the remains that way. (54)

This disavowal and narratorial reticence suggest that some essential part of the narrative has been withheld. But the sentence demands further scrutiny. Why does the narrator "like" the bullshit part the best? What he appears to prefer is the protection that bullshit supplies. Since he has made his reluctance clear, if obliged he will tell war stories that are only tangentially true. The story the narrator tells at the beginning of "Bodies," then, is not so much a lie as a tale that fails to represent its essential truth (though it may point the listener in that general direction). In this instance, bullshitting is neither lying nor telling the truth; it exists in an in-between space.

In this vein, Lee J.M. Seymour sees bullshit as a social practice primarily concerned with creating an impression rather than with communicating the veracity of what is being said (572–3). Seymour makes a point of distinguishing lying from bullshitting, arguing the former "is about falsity," while bullshitting "is about fakery: the speaker's pretence of concern for truth is fake, but what is said is not necessarily false" (574). This approach bears some resemblance to the narratorial strategy in "Bodies." After all, the events he describes (even if they are thirdhand), *may* have happened. The insertion of the clause "more or less" is telling. Is it more or is it less? If the narrative does in fact describe what happened, in what ways is it a lie?

Here Klay touches on the fictionalization of experience – how we emplot the elements of a narrative so that we tailor them to fit our agenda or to appeal to a specific audience. If the term "bullshit" does not apply to the events in question, then it must refer to the way they are recounted. The narrator seeks to tell his audience a version of the story he thinks they want to hear. In this case, the telling of bullshit may also be construed as an implicit critique of the civilian audience whose ignorance prevents them from distinguishing between veracity and fabrication. It is "total bullshit," finally, because it is not the story he *really* wants to tell. His tales are not accurate representations of the way working with remains made him feel; dealing with shattered bodies is neither a gruesome comedy nor an incidence of pathos.

Bullshit reflects the veteran's ambivalent attitude towards narrative. Because, as the story makes clear, veterans are warily in search of listeners. They want to tell their stories and be heard, but they also exhibit contempt and distrust of their audience. "Bodies" is about the veteran's quest to find someone (anyone) who will listen – even if it sometimes means reshaping the narrative. The story ends with the

narrator striving to tell the tale he really wants to tell. To that end, he seeks a civilian who will truly listen. His quest leads him back to his ex-girlfriend, Rachel, whom he describes as someone who "listened," to which he adds, "and there's a beauty in that you don't often find," (55). Nevertheless, he finds himself incapable of recounting the story he desperately wants to tell. "Listen," he repeats to her three times without ever getting to the tale of the Marine who died in flames: "the worst burn case we ever had" (66, 69).

This inability might be attributed to the fact that she is a pacifist, while the man in the bar to whom he eventually does tell the story had "a cousin who'd died in Iraq" (69). But we might note how a lack of intimacy with this stranger allows for the telling. In fact, it is the lack of response the narrator appears to appreciate:

He didn't say anything else, which was smart. I waited for him to say something wrong, to ask about the war or the Marine that died or the rocks that G and me had kept with us, that I still had in my pocket that night at the bar. But he didn't say another word, and neither did I. (71)

The narrator appears content with the interaction, if only for the fact that he was able to tell his story to someone. In the first instance, the narrator seeks to satisfy his audience, but derives no pleasure himself from the telling. In the second, he does not seem to care about a response, but rather only in telling the tale for his own sake – there is no reciprocity to be found here. And in both cases, the essence of the story has been withheld – whether it is about the body in the bag, or the rocks in the narrator's pocket. Finally, the experience does not appear to offer the narrator any real satisfaction: "And that was that for me telling people stories" (71). The narrator's frustration at the end of the story – leading to his resolution – stems, in part, from an inability to engage in any kind of productive dialogue.

The narrator of "War Stories" begins by expressing a similar sentiment towards narrative as that which ends "Bodies": "I'm tired of telling war stories" (213). The sentence signals both narratorial fatigue and exasperation; the narrator makes clear he has lost all faith in the possibility of such an entente. The significant difference, as we shall see, is that his attitude is countered by the presence of a second teller. The narrator and his fellow veteran, Jenks, have agreed to meet two women, Jessie and Sarah, in order to recount their battlefield experiences. Both were victims of an IED attack, and while the former has emerged relatively unscathed (at least physically), Jenks has been horribly wounded and disfigured: "There's so much scar tissue and wrinkled skin, I never know if he's happy or sad or pissed or what" (213). It is his story primarily that the women, and Sarah specifically, have come to hear. As with other stories in the collection, both teller and listener are physically present, making their interactions an integral part of the narrative. The transmission of these war stories, however, proves to be inherently

problematic. The narrator's commentary throughout the story is colored by an obvious mistrust of anyone who would seek these stories out: "I look at Sarah and know for a certified fact I'm not telling this girl shit" (223).

This attitude further impacts his perception of his fellow veteran's storytelling. He states that "Jenks's story is pretty obvious," counteracting the expectations of the reader/listener, who no doubt anticipates (perhaps like Sarah) a dramatic tale full of angst and suffering. After all, what happened to Jenks in Iraq is not exceptional; it is what happened to any number of young men driving armored vehicles up and down booby-trapped roads on a daily basis. At the same time, Jenks's appearance warrants and/or confirms the trauma narrative. Looking at his face, the narrator observes, civilians are bound to "start imagining all sorts of stuff" (215). These injuries thus imbue Jenks's experiences with a higher order of legitimacy. But they also, in the narrator's eyes, give Jenks license to fabricate: "Who's gonna call bullshit when you're sitting there in the corner looking all *Nightmare on Elm Street?*" (214).

To Jenks's credit, however, he rejects such strategies. In fact, he seems almost embarrassed about recounting his experiences. In many ways, this is Klay's most explicit take on the "wounded storyteller" narrative, a recurrent trope in *Redeployment*. At the same time, the text resolutely resists lavishing pity on these veterans, or suggesting they are traumatized. Jenks is truly ambivalent about relating his experiences and seems to proceed out of some sense of obligation. Even as Sarah begins recording, he suggests that the narrator probably remembers more about the incident: "Honestly, I was so out of it. I feel more sorry for the guys who had to rush in and treat me than for myself" (228).

The narrator, for his part, is not buying it: "This is Jenks's standard line. It's utter bullshit" (228). He maintains this is part of Jenks's prepared narrative – telling his listeners something (he thinks) they want to hear. And, indeed, this is a narratorial stance veterans often adopt. Liam Corley (2017), for instance, points to "the trope of the veteran – the historically ungrounded and culturally produced version of veteran identity" as a major obstacle in civil-military relations. This trope, he contends, "distorts, constrains, and even creates veteran thought and speech. The trope is a powerful shaping force that operates on veterans even before they decide to enter the discursive arena" (71). As Corley notes, the conferral of narratorial authority, akin to veteran mystique, is often an impediment that leads to "frustration, anger, resentful rather than strategic silence, and even self-stereotyping speech that surrenders individuality for the easy eloquence that subservience to the trope enables" (71). So the narrator may not be completely wrong – Jenks might be engaging in some evasive maneuvers as he deflects attention away from himself. But this is also the narrator's take on the storytelling; he imposes his own narrative desire upon his fellow soldier's story. All he can do is imagine what he would do if Jenks's situation were his own. As such, he labels Jenks's narrative "bullshit" – the kind he would spin

if he were in the same predicament. The narrator views this as a ploy – "his standard line" – because he is unable to conceive of a veteran speaking honestly to an ignorant civilian of his experiences. The narrator's cynicism thus clouds his judgment, for while there may be some artifice and deferral in Jenks's telling, it is certainly not "utter bullshit." If there is a measure of bullshit, it may just be that which allows Jenks to access his experience and tell what he needs to tell.

And Sarah, despite the narrator's suspicions, is trying to do her part. She is working with "a group of writers from Iraq Veterans Against the War" recording stories from returning vets (221). She even demonstrates a genuine desire to know the details of Jenks's story. She is not solely interested in the graphic and traumatic aspects of the tale: "Good ... But let's slow down. What happened first?" (231). Through this demonstration of patience, Sarah opens up a space for Jenks to tell his story. She is also listening, not merely intent on gathering information to fulfill her agenda. In the end, Jessie (a veteran herself) defends Sarah against the narrator's accusations, arguing that what the latter is doing might actually benefit Jenks:

"Don't let her get to you," she tells the narrator, "she's been like that since high school."

"A bitch?"

"She's better than she seems."

"Is Sarah gonna fuck Jenks?" I say. "'Cause that'd be acceptable too."

"She'll listen to him." (232)

And when Jessie and the narrator return to the table, Jenks is in a visibly better mood, from which one might infer that Sarah's approach has been more helpful, more therapeutic, than the joking-about-mishap stance adopted by the narrator. In the end, Jessie tells the narrator, "I thought it might be good for him ... to tell his story to a civilian who'd really listen" (235) – which it does. Despite his ambivalence, or maybe because of it, Jenks benefits from his interaction with Sarah. What is significant is that she listened to that which he wished to tell – she has provided a platform for working through his experiences. The effect on him is noticeable. There is no question at the end of the story as to which of the two veterans is happier. Jenks's manner of telling his story combined with Sarah's willingness to listen provide the conditions for a positive civil-military encounter.

We might consider, then, whether there are not different kinds of bullshit with different purposes. The first type is the kind spouted by the narrator of "Bodies," to satisfy the morbid curiosity of his civilian audience (whether they be women or men). The second type is used as a form of defense mechanism, deflecting the probing gaze of those who would seek to know or appropriate the veteran's experience, while still allowing the veteran to tell his story. The third, a more mutual kind signals itself and, in the process, alerts the listener to the dialogic aspects of the interaction. In this version, the teller-listener bond, such as it is, allows the former to work through his experience while committing

the civilian to a more reciprocal, and hence responsible, connection with the veteran.

One might suggest, then, that the narrator of "War Stories" mistakes Jenks's bullshit for the first type, when he is actually engaging in the second, if not the third. The narrator may display disdain for bullshit, but Jenks's kind provides a jumping off point for telling his story. Jenks wants someone to listen to him, to look beyond his deflections, and actually hear what he has to say. It is even possible, given her project, that he has found someone in Sarah who is willing to acknowledge mutual responsibility. It is to this third, and perhaps most productive, type to which I now turn my attention. For although Klay utilizes bullshit in its different forms throughout *Redeployment*, it is perhaps in this third kind that he invests the most hope for fruitful civil-military interaction. For it is on these occasions that he most fully tests the extent to which these parties are able and willing to get beyond the "essential falseness" of their relationship.

A veteran's reconnection with his community is dependent on the civilian's simultaneous recognition of the soldier's sameness *and* otherness. The difficulty, of course, is that many of the actions performed on the battlefield exist entirely outside the civilian's frame of reference. And versions of the oft-made claim that "you wouldn't understand, you weren't there" further serve to keep the civilian at a distance and exceptionalize the experiences of the veteran. We might say, then, that the veteran's "mark of otherness" is both a call for empathy and a rejection of it. Klay's fiction exhibits both faith and skepticism in this possibility. As we shall see, success depends upon the collaborative and interreliant qualities of the interaction. Indeed, as Lucas Thompson points out, it is the "intimate" quality of the veteran's revelations that enable the bypassing of barriers: "The fact that many of these intimacies are highly disturbing and run counter to common military tropes gives them heightened power, and again furthers the sense that they exist outside the realm of manipulative or coercive social scripts and structures" (202). The vulnerability necessarily exhibited by the veteran can lead an empathetic listener to adopt a more receptive stance towards the telling. In turn, this allows for an openness to alterity and a genuine curiosity in the other's perspective. Finally, this stance is further tempered by a critical distance that permits the listener to be alert to the emotions of the other while gauging her own (emotive) reactions to the telling. Klay's "Psychological Operations" dramatizes just such an encounter between a veteran with a genuine desire to tell and a listener with an open, but critical, wish to hear.

The story presents a narrator, Waguih, whose relationship to the civilian population is strained. So much so that the resentment he feels borders on contempt:

I didn't know how to tell her what coming home meant. The weird thing with being a veteran, at least for me, is that you do feel better than most people. You risked your life for something bigger than yourself. How many people can say that? You chose to

serve. Maybe you didn't understand American foreign policy or why you were at war. Maybe you never will. But it doesn't matter. You held up your hand and said, "I'm willing to die for these worthless civilians." (203)

Does he actually mean to say, "feel *you are* better than most people"? Indeed, an air of superiority suffuses this passage with the narrator lording over those "worthless civilians" who now plague his post-war experience.⁵ But the statement is also paradoxical; civilians cannot be entirely worthless, since he is willing to die for them (or at least some idealized notion of them).

Early in the story, the narrator derides his civilian classmates at Amherst for falling under the sway of the "veteran mystique," and he ridicules the ease with which they revert to military stereotypes. In fact, he points to "a perversity in me" (172) that compels him to tap into "that old familiar vet-versus-civilian anger" (173). At the same time, he is not averse to using this "mystique" to his advantage. Evident here are the narrator's warring impulses – between wanting to be welcomed back into the fold and wishing to assert his difference. We might say the narrator seeks to simultaneously *confirm* and *subvert* civilian expectations. Consequently, his narrative oscillates between these two poles.

His interactions with a fellow student, Zara, are fundamentally different from those he undertakes with the others. Because while an air of confrontation remains, one senses they share much in common. For a start, both Zara and he are outsiders at Amherst. Waguih goes so far as to claim that he is the "most diverse thing" on campus (174). Since he is a veteran of the Iraq War *and* an Egyptian Copt, there is some truth to this assertion. For her part, Zara hails from Baltimore, providing her with a legitimacy to rival that of the narrator (a reference is even made to *The Wire*, imbuing her with a greater degree of street cred [171]). And in contrast to her classmates, Zara is not so easily swayed or impressed by this mystique. In fact, Waguih comes to think of her as his "sparring partner." Zara's resistance, and her own confrontational spirit, thus make her an empathetic counterpart. Here is someone who will not adopt the lukewarm reverence of his classmates or football crowds, and who will push him to move beyond the narratives he typically tells about his experiences. As Allyson Booth notes, "In the face of ... Zara's willingness to offend, he is able to say what he feels needs saying, which is all about the ugliness of war" (175). In other words, Zara's resistance to his manipulation elicits a more honest telling of his experiences.

At the same time, the title itself should put the reader on alert. A definition offers some insight into the tactics employed by the narrator. The Department of Defense describes Psychological Operations (now renamed Military Information Support Operations) as maneuvers intended

to convey selected information and indicators to foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motives, objective reasoning, and ultimately the behavior of

foreign governments, organizations, groups, and individuals. The purpose of psychological operations is to induce or reinforce foreign attitudes and behavior favorable to the originator's objectives. (U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff P 1–02)⁶

In many ways, Zara can be thought of as "foreign," while the narrative itself seems skewed to meet the "originator's objectives." Waguih controls the flow of information and seeks to influence Zara's response to both himself and his stories. Manipulation, as Lucas Thompson points out, seems to be an inevitable part of these interactions. Interestingly, the narrator himself seems unsure as to his own intentions:

I wasn't PsyOpsing her into it, so I didn't know how she'd react. Or if I was PsyOpsing her, since you're always exerting some kind of pressure even when you're laying yourself bare, then it was the least conscious maneuvering I could do. (181)

It seems clear, however, that Zara is not oblivious to these machinations:

There was a long silence. "Why," she said, "do you think I would want to hear it?"
"I don't know," I said. But I let her see, in my face, that it was important to me. "PsyOps works best when you mean it." (181)

Klay's text thus addresses the complexity of the teller-listener interaction. No matter how well-intentioned the narrator may be, he cannot ignore the possibility that his narrative is on some level driven by his own more personal desires – ranging from seducing Zara to making her grasp the horrors of his military engagement. This dilemma, Thompson argues, can be addressed through active recognition that one is engaging in manipulation and employing a degree of transparency with the person one is seeking to manipulate.

It is no surprise, then, that the word "bullshit" occurs twice during this pivotal moment in the text. When Zara asks why he wants to tell her his story, Waguih replies, "Because I like you ... Because you never give me any fucking respect. And because I want to level with you" (181). He quickly adds that he intends to give her an honest account, "without any of that lame bullshit" he might be inclined to use with others (181). In other words, he proposes to tell a version free of the artifice often employed to meet civilian expectations. He tells her, "I know how to talk to people ... I can spin some bullshit if you want. I'm good at that. But I don't want to lie. At least, not to you" (181). In seeking to gain Zara's trust, then, he openly admits to his propensity for resorting to untruths, should the circumstances demand it. Should we then take Waguih at his word, when this admission, paired with the interjection that he likes Zara, might simply be part

of his psychological operations? What role might bullshit serve in the formulation of an honest tale?

"It is correct to say of bullshit," Harry G. Frankfurt (2005) declares, "both that it is short of lying and that those who perpetrate it misrepresent themselves in a certain way" (18–19). Paradoxically, the declaration of bullshit may also indicate the possibility that some unspoken truth – something the narrator finds himself or herself unable to pronounce – may lie buried beneath. Discussing the notion of "bull sessions," for instance, Frankfurt contends that they are usually concerned with sensitive or controversial issues with which many people may feel uncomfortable. He suggests these sessions provide individuals with an opportunity to express ideas they might otherwise keep to themselves:

People are generally reluctant to speak altogether openly about these topics if they expect that they might be taken too seriously. What tends to go on in a bull session is that the participants try out various thoughts and attitudes in order to see how it feels to hear themselves saying such things and in order to discover how others respond, without its being assumed that they are committed to what they say: it is understood by everyone in a bull session that the statements people make do not necessarily reveal what they really believe or how they really feel. The main point is to make possible a high level of candor and an experimental or adventuresome approach to the topics under discussion. (36–37)

In the case of Klay's narrators, we might argue that bullshit is that which allows them to reveal "what they really believe or how they really feel." Designating all or part of the narrative as "bullshit" enables the teller to engage in a "high level of candor" while providing plausible deniability. At the same time, bullshit permits the narrator to "try on" a variety of narratives, testing the truth value of each. As Donald Mears (2015) suggests, bullshitting "allows individuals to engage in a free-form presentation of self in which the possibilities of what was has been, is, or could be are rehearsed, challenged, modified, or discarded. It enables individuals to transcend the everyday sense of self and potentially tap into possibilities for creating new and different 'selves.'" Indeed, the approach may provide the veteran with an opportunity for self-fashioning – to mold a new identity, incorporating past and current selves. By invoking bullshit, Klay's narrators avoid being "taken too seriously," without necessarily disavowing the (personal) impact of the related experiences. In this vein, Perla and Carifio (2007) note that bullshit acts as a testing ground for controversial and sometimes subversive ideas. In their words, bullshit is "often a highly dynamic and necessary matrix for the development of expressive, creative, critical, and higher order thinking and representation that give birth to the truth or/and new truths" (122). In this version of things, the interaction becomes a means for

speaker and listener to "work through" the potential truth-value of the related narrative.

Indeed, such an exercise is contingent upon the participation and engagement of both parties. James Fredal (2011), for instance, emphasizes "the interactional quality" of bullshit, arguing that the dynamic depends "not only [on] a speaker with a specific set of qualities or concerns (his or her intent or ethos), but also characteristic features of the bullshit itself (logos), and any resulting responses on the part of the audience or addressee" (247). We might thus think of a bull session as an occasion when both parties are cognizant that the truth is being manipulated. To some degree, then, the teller is dependent on the listener to see past the bullshit, or at least recognize it for what it is. Because even when the teller engages in deception, he can never be entirely sure the listener has been deceived. In fact, it is quite possible, given the hyperbolic and dramatic elements of the story (as is the case with the first narrative in "Bodies") that the listener recognizes the story is being told for effect. Certainly, the teller is aware of the extent to which things are being stretched, but he or she is also likely to provide clues/cues to the listener that such is the case – that is, if he or she does not come right out and declare it ("it was total bullshit"). As Fredal further observes: "When someone does feel or express that an action or statement is bullshit, it is liable either to be put on probation, as it were, and the statement or gesture subjected to heightened scrutiny to determine whether it ought to be accepted as sincere, true, just, or right, or to be rejected outright" (251–2). Again, by announcing that deliberate misrepresentation is at work, the teller purposely obliges the listener to engage in "heightened scrutiny." The stories in *Redeployment* are much concerned with this kind of interaction. As Klay (2014) himself suggests, "veterans need an audience that is both receptive and critical" (A Failure). In other words, the listener must be able to accept, and see beyond, the narratorial strategies of the veteran's story. The interaction thus depends on a kind of *quid pro quo* – the teller will open himself up and, in exchange, the listener/reader will make herself receptive to the tale. As Booth notes, Klay's stories seek to "[unsettle] civilian assumptions about war and how any one veteran is likely to have experienced it" (172). It becomes incumbent upon the civilian to recognize the preconceptions she brings to the interaction and to come to terms with that unsettlement in order to truly hear the veteran.

At the same time, the listener needs to utilize her critical faculties and not simply accept the veteran's tale wholeheartedly – Zara Davies is precisely this kind of listener. In the first paragraph of the story, she is described as "aggressive, combative, and lovely" (169). These qualities serve her in good stead in her interactions with Waguih. She also appeals to him as a listener because she refuses to be awed or silenced by his veteran mystique. Rather, she contests his perspective – even going so far as to label him, and other veterans, "pawns" of the government. As noted, it is this

adversarial approach that compels him to plumb deeper into his narrative:

She didn't seem to realize how this conversation was different from class, where we bullshitted over political theory. This mattered. And every time she contradicted me with her smug little assumptions about who I was and why I did what I'd done, it grated. It made me want to shut my mouth and hate her. Hate her for her ignorance when she was wrong, and hate her for her arrogance when she was right. But if you're going to understand, you have to keep talking. And that was my mission. Make her understand me. (197)

Waguih is struck by her calm reception of his story, but also by the lack of any kind of agenda – she simply listens and responds. Of course, the word "understand" encompasses a great deal. He wants her to understand why he behaved the way he did, why he feels the way he feels, and even why he is interacting with her now.

To that end, he will tell Zara two war stories. The first involves his watching – through a thermal scope – an insurgent's life run out, in the place of the Marine who has actually recorded the kill: "The adrenaline was fading and [the Marine] was just left with this thing he'd done, and he didn't want to watch" (189). Interestingly, the text proposes that responsibility can be transferred or shared through watching or listening. After Waguih tells her about the event, Zara observes, "That's yours now" (189). By witnessing in the other's stead, she suggests, he has taken the act upon himself. As Zara generously concludes, "You took it from him so he wouldn't have to watch" (189). The ripples of culpability, however, expand far beyond the battlefield. In the same way that responsibility for the death of the insurgent is conferred through watching, so too can it be transferred, the story implies, through telling. Zara comes to recognize that the narrative has drawn her into the circle of ownership: "And now you're telling me" (189). The Marine's story now belongs to her as well. In this way, Klay establishes a continuum of responsibility for the actions carried out in war. Through his admissions, Waguih creates a degree of intimacy with Zara. Through this dialogue – his telling and her listening – he intends for her to acknowledge the culpability (including her own) of the civilian population. Because even Zara who begs the narrator to "be honest with her" is not immune from exercising deniability. When she defends herself and other civilians by arguing they were lied to by the Bush Administration, he responds sarcastically, "Oh, my God ... A politician lied! Then it's not your fault!" (206). The tables are now turned, with Waguih suggesting that civilians were also pawns in the government's machinations. We see here the beginnings of common ground between the veteran and the civilian. And though this may not be empathy, it is mutuality of a kind. After all, if the civilian

accepts responsibility then she is more likely to recognize a greater degree of sameness with the veteran. From the veteran's perspective, it is the righting of an imbalance – he has managed to elicit some recognition of complicity from the civilian. The story is no longer only Waguih's, it is Zara's also.

Waguih soon recognizes, however, that his tale has not had the desired effect: "now that I'd told the story, I didn't feel I'd actually told her anything at all. I think she knew it too, that the story hadn't been enough, that something was missing and neither of us knew how to find it" (189). This sense of inadequacy, combined with Zara's resistance, compels him to provide a more brutal depiction of the war. Prefacing his second story, he tells her, "I did kill people ... I didn't shoot anybody, but I was definitely responsible" (200). He then describes the horrifying methods they used to instigate attacks from the insurgents – shouting over the loudspeakers that they were gang-raping their leader's daughters – so the American soldiers could then mow them down as they madly rushed from their position. So though he is not directly to blame for the deaths of the Iraqis, he *is* responsible. Much the same can be said about Zara and the civilian population who consented to the war. Listening to (*or reading*) the narrative removes any pretense of innocence; Zara can no longer claim ignorance as to what has occurred in Iraq. It is impossible for her to *unknow* what Waguih has told her. This notion is heightened through contrast. After telling his tale, Waguih expects much the same reaction from Zara that he received from his father, an outburst of outrage and disgust. When this does not transpire, it is he who is unsettled. Thompson suggests that Zara offers "a kind of forgiveness" at the end of the story (201). For her part, Booth argues that "the story sets up a speaker-listener relationship based on mutual discomfort" (175). But Zara's calm response – that "it's okay" – seems perfectly calibrated. It is neither too strong, nor too soft. It does not offer pity nor condemnation – rather it signals to Waguih that she empathizes with his situation (even if she does not condone or agree with his actions). More important, "Psychological Operations" ends with Zara turning back and saying, "Maybe we'll talk another time" (212). In this way, she leaves open the possibility of further interactions and a mutual "working through" of that which Waguih has undergone.

While one might be tempted to see a glimmer of hope here, Klay's stories nevertheless reflect an awareness that each side is restricted by its circumstances. These interactions are further complicated by competing narratives stateside (what people want to hear, what others want people to hear, etc.). In an interview, Klay outlines the problematic nature of recounting war stories, since the veteran's experience of war often differs sharply from war narratives proliferating back home. As he notes, veterans often return "to all the stories about war our culture [*i*]s telling itself. Trying to have a conversation with someone (or even an honest conversation with yourself) about your war experience is an exercise in navigating through all the cultural garbage that's out there" (Rubenstein). Early in "War Stories," for instance, the veterans

throw around the names of movies – *Black Hawk Down* and *The Hurt Locker* – suggesting that civilian knowledge of war is largely circumscribed by the cultural products they have willingly ingested. Klay suggests that part of the difficulty resides in bridging the gap between "public mythology and lived experience," between what the citizenry imagines about the war and what actually happens, between "over here" and "over there." The films to which the men allude are part of the story "our culture is telling itself" about the war and, as the text implies, help create false impressions about the lived experience of these veterans.

The stories in *Redeployment* examine whether civilian unwillingness and ignorance may be broken down through narratorial intervention. Throughout its pages, the text models a number of civil-military interactions, wherein the narrative remains a kinetic and mutable thing. The tale serves as the site within which both teller and listener are transformed. As Kristiana Willsey (2015) notes, veteran narratives are often "dialogic and interreliant – the experience being shared is the one created within the story, where teller and audience alike meet and vicariously relive the past" (218). Under these conditions, the narrative is both the impetus for, and the product of, the dialogue. While this may appear as mutual and reciprocal engagement, however, one nevertheless recognizes a level of directional inequality in these interactions – the teller always has more to lose, or ventures more, than the listener. Consequently, the teller often seeks to right this imbalance by obliging the listener to "own" his or her part of the narrative. In her examination of war stories, Willsey thus expresses an interest in "how the imposition of responsibility for a narrative may be deferred, negotiated, or otherwise managed" (217). She further conceptualizes narration itself as an act of resistance, one that pushes back against the stereotypes (hero/victim/villain) often imposed upon the veteran.

While this is surely an aspect of narrative with which Klay's narrator's wrestle, I would further argue that they also exhibit a desire for some form of "shared responsibility." If the veteran is going to share his combat experience (including moments of vulnerability), then it is incumbent upon the civilian to acknowledge his or her part in the unfolding of these same events. It is an attempt to strip the civilian of any ignorance or plausible deniability to which she may still cling. In this vein, Sarah Bulmer and David Jackson (2016) point out that veteran-civilian exchanges are often intended as a "call to witness." These dialogues, they maintain, "imply a relationship with obligations" (33). In their work, Bulmer and Jackson (a veteran of the Falklands War) highlight the capacity of dialogue for providing access to an "affective dimension" that is often missing from representations of the veteran experience (26). Engaged in a dialogue, the listener is no longer simply absorbing a story, but also responding to it, and altering it through his or her responses. At the same time, the veteran finds a neutral space (of a kind) through which to relive and possibly share his experiences, playing them out in a different context. As Bulmer and Jackson

(2016) note, "The conversation is more than the sum of its parts; it is more than just another 'method' for extracting or disseminating the same data. Rather the process itself *generates* different knowledge and calls upon us to embrace different ways of knowing" (34). We might say that the dialogue transposes the narrative from battlefield to homeland, breaking down the wall between "over there" and "over here." Klay's stories dramatize the dialogue between veteran and civilian, setting the stage for such encounters. The stories illustrate, in no uncertain terms, the manner in which responsibility, to use Willsey's phrase, "may be deferred, negotiated, or otherwise managed." In the case of Klay's narrators, we might also add "imparted."

In *Odysseus in America*, Jonathan Shay (2002) principally bemoans society's inability to "offer purification to those who do terrible acts of war on our behalf" (245). But he also recognizes that this stems from a reluctance to acknowledge a shared responsibility with the veteran and the brutal acts of war he or she may have committed. As Shay observes:

The community as a whole, which sent these young people to train in the profession of arms and to use those arms, is no less in need of purification. Such rituals *must* be communal with the returning veterans, not something done to or for them before they return to civilian life. (245)

The act Shay imagines is reciprocal; it requires mutual recognition of blame and the need for communal purification. In essence, he is appealing for empathetic rapprochement. And when he signals to the communality of the gesture, he is pleading for society to re-integrate the veteran and not accentuate his or her otherness, to understand and to own its share of that which was committed on the field of battle. But the challenges remain: how to establish this mutual understanding and how to demonstrate that it has in fact been established. Shay suggests that only when soldiers' narratives have been incorporated into the social fabric – rather than being ignored, denied, or condemned – will the divide between veteran and civilian begin to collapse:

When trauma survivors hear that enough of the truth of their experience has been understood, remembered, and retold with enough fidelity to carry *some* of this truth – no one who did not experience their trauma can ever grasp *all* of the truth – then the circle of communalization is complete. (244)

A few lines later, however, Shay admits that he does "not know how the creation of a new and widely accepted cultural practice can be accomplished, but I do know that we need it" (245).

Because as it stands, civilians are exempt from responsibility. They have only some vague conception of what these men and women are "fighting for." Only through a better understanding of the veteran's experience can civilians

recognize what they asked of them. In this vein, Marta Bragin (2010) uses Elizabeth Lima's notion of the "social imaginary" to suggest that the populace is likely to generate its own (more palatable) notion of military life, since it has never experienced it for itself. This communal formulation, Bragin argues, acts as an impediment since establishing connection "would require replacing the imaginary experience that our minds have learned to tolerate with the lived experience of an actual human being" (320). Finally, she exhibits a degree of despondency equal to Shay's, concluding that "this is what we as a society are unable or unwilling to do" (320).

Klay's response, as this essay suggests, is to emphasize the role of the imagination in bridging the divide. As he contends in "After War, a Failure of the Imagination," civilians must not shirk from putting themselves in the veteran's shoes. In placing civilian-listeners at the heart of some of these stories, Klay establishes dialogical dynamics within which a sheltered and (wilfully?) ignorant civilian readership is obliged to consider its role in the current situation. And while aware of the limitations of this endeavor – made evident in his repeated invocation of bullshit – Klay nevertheless evinces some measure of hope in the possibility of a rapprochement between civilian and veteran. Some of the interactions in *Redeployment* – and "Psychological Operations" specifically – allude to a time when imagination will no longer fail but will serve to bridge the seemingly unbreachable divide.

Notes

- ¹ In a similar vein, William J. Bartolomea argues that the contract between the community and the military is in jeopardy: "no one in the relationship believes the bargain is on solid footing."
- ² See Wilson et. al (2009) who also suggest that veterans seek to "communalize" their experiences through telling (419). In this vein, Marta Bragin (2010) warns that "as long as the veteran is seen as alien other, whose changed view of the world is to be treated not as a normal response to extreme violence, but as a sickness from which recovery is to be achieved; it may be difficult for veterans to heal and equally difficult for society to grow" (318–9).
- ³ The word is used, for and to varying effect, several times throughout the collection (11, 33, 35, 54, 115, 170, 173, 181, 191, 195, 199, 214, 215, 228).
- ⁴ Phil Klay, *Redeployment* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2014), 53. Hereafter cited in text.
- ⁵ The sentiment is expressed more than once in *Redeployment*. In "Prayer in the Furnace," for instance, the chaplain, writes of having the "sense that this place [the battlefield] is holier than back home." In contrast, stateside is described as: "Gluttonous, fat, oversexed, overconsuming, materialist home, where we're too lazy to see our own faults" (151).
- ⁶ The renaming of Psychological Operations as Military Information Support Operations was intended to deflect or counteract negative associations attached to the

former term such as propaganda, brainwashing and manipulation. It is interesting, then, to note that Klay, in contrast to the Department of Defense, chose to preserve the earlier term as the title of his story.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

References

- Bartolomea, W. J.** (2015). "Shrinking the Civil-Military Divide: A Military Perspective." *Joint Forces Staff College*. <http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a622147.pdf>.
- Booth, A.** (2019). "Thank You for Your Service: Negotiating the Civilian-Military Divide in Phil Klay's *Redeployment*." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 61(2): 168–192. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7560/TSL61204>
- Bragin, M.** (2010). "Can Anyone Here Know Who I Am? Co-Constructing Meaningful Narratives with Combat Veterans." *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 38, 316–326. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10615-010-0267-4>
- Bulmer, S., & Jackson, D.** (2016). "You do not live in my skin: Embodiment, Voice, and the Veteran." *Critical Military Studies*, 2(1–2): 25–40. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23337486.2015.1118799>
- Corley, L.** (2017). "Epistemological Interference and the Trope of the Veteran." *Journal of Veteran Studies*, 2(1): 69–78. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.29>
- Frankfurt, H. G.** (2005). *On Bullshit*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400826537>
- Fredal, J.** (2011). "Rhetoric and Bullshit." *College English*, 73(3): 243–259. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25790474>
- Klay, P.** (2014). "After War, a Failure of the Imagination." *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/09/opinion/sunday/after-war-a-failure-of-the-imagination.html>
- Klay, P.** (2014). *Redeployment*. New York: The Penguin Press.
- Klay, P.** (2014). "Treat Veterans with Respect, Not Pity." *Wall Street Journal*. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/treat-veterans-with-respect-not-pity-1400856331>
- Mears, D. P.** (2015). "The Ubiquity, Functions, and Contexts of Bullshitting." *Journal of Mundane Behaviour*, 3(2). <http://mundanebehavior.org/the-ubiquity-functions-and-contexts-of-bullshitting>
- Packer, G.** (2014). "Home Fires." *New Yorker*. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/04/07/home-fires-2>
- Perla, R. J., & Carifio, J.** (2007). "Psychological, Philosophical, and Educational Criticisms of Harry Frankfurt's Concept and Views About "Bullshit" in Human Discourse, Discussions, and Exchanges." *Interchange*, 38(2): 119–136. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10780-007-9019-y>
- Rubenstein, R.** (2014). Interview with Phil Klay. *National Book Foundation*. http://www.nationalbook.org/nba2014_f_klay_interv.html
- Seymour, L. J. M.** (2014). "Let's Bullshit! Arguing, Bargaining and Dissembling over Darfur." *European Journal of International Relations*, 20(3): 571–595. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066113476118>
- Shay, J.** (2002). *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming*. New York: Scribner.
- Sherman, N.** (2015). *Afterwar: Healing the Moral Wounds of Our Soldiers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Thompson, L.** (2019). "PsyOps Works Best when You Mean It": Literary Manipulation in Phil Klay's *Redeployment*." *Critique*, 60(2): 191–204. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2018.1520687>
- U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff.** *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, Washington, D.C., Joint Publication 1-02, November 8, 2010, as amended through February 15, 2016. As of December 5, 2019: https://fas.org/irp/doddir/dod/jp1_02.pdf
- Willsey, K.** (2015). "Falling Out of Performance: Pragmatic Breakdown in Veterans' Storytelling." In T. J. Blank & A. Kitta (Eds.), *Diagnosing Folklore: Perspectives on Disability, Health, and Trauma* (pp. 215–232). Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14325/mississippi/9781496804259.003.0011>
- Wilson, R. M., Leary, S., Mitchell, M., & Ritchie, D.** (2009). "Military Veterans Sharing First-Person Stories of War and Homecoming: A Pathway to Social Engagement, Personal Healing, and Public Understanding of Veterans' Issues." *Smith College Studies in Social Work*, 79(3–4): 392–432. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00377310903130373>

How to cite this article: Gauthier, T. (2020). "I Can Spin Some Bullshit If You Want": Narrating (and Bridging?) The Civil-Military Divide in Phil Klay's *Redeployment*. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 6(1), pp. 135–144. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v6i1.139>

Submitted: 29 August 2019

Accepted: 20 January 2020

Published: 27 March 2020

Copyright: © 2020 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.