Yale Talk: Conversations with Peter Salovey

Episode 15: Nobel Laureate Louise Glück on Teaching and Poetry

**Peter Salovey:** Hello, everyone, and welcome to Yale Talk.

Today, I’m honored to be joined by Professor Louise Glück. Louise doesn’t need a great deal of introduction. Besides being awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature this year, she has won just about every other prize for poetry the world has to offer: the Pulitzer Prize, the National Humanities Medal, the National Book Award, the National Book Critics Circle Award, and the Bollingen Prize, which is administered by Yale’s Beinecke Library. And she has served as poet laureate of the United States. She’s a poet’s poet, as well as one lauded and loved by countless readers.

So, Louise, it’s such a pleasure to have you with us today.

**Louise Glück:** I hope you say that when we’re all done. [Laughter]

**PS:** I have no doubt I will. I know you don’t do these kinds of things very often, and I’m thrilled that you’ve agreed to do this podcast for members of the Yale community who are friends of poetry and who wish to hear you.

I know you’ve written about this, but for the people listening who may not know, I’m wondering if you could say a little bit about growing up—your family, your schooling, your discovery of poetry?

**LG:** My discovery of poetry happened very, very, very early. And it was something of a fluke.

My family was interested in education and ambitious in terms of education. My sister and I were raised with no concern, it appeared, for gender. It was assumed. Our bedtime story from my father was the story of Joan of Arc, from which the burning had been excised. So we were being raised to save France or something similar—invent radium. But I came upon books of, anthologies of verse in my house and notably my grandmother’s house. My grandmother—we lived very near to my mother’s mother, who was a great source of love in my early life, but she was not a woman of literary tastes at all. So it was a surprise to find the book there. And for all I know, I’m inventing some of these memories or collapsing several memories into one. But I know I was reading—

**PS:** Louise, that’s what keeps psychologists in business. [Laughter] So as a psychologist, I’m happy to hear you say things like that.

**LG:** Well, I’ve certainly kept many psychoanalysts in business for decades.

I was reading the songs from Shakespeare’s plays when I was, what, four, five years old maybe. And, I mean I didn’t understand the song from *Cymbeline*, “Fear No More the Heat o’ the Sun,” but I felt the summons of it. I felt the gloriousness of it. I could hear that even though I was a little child.

In any case, I was reading these poems to myself and sort of hearing them out loud in my head. I always hear better reading than hearing. When I read, I hear. When I’m being recited to, I feel terrible resentment at being separated from the poem by the personality of the reader.

In any case, I was doing all this very young, and I started writing poems very young. My father also wrote. He wrote doggerel verses. So there was a lot of that sort of tinny music-making in our family. It seems as though I was raised entirely by my father, but the truth is, I was raised almost entirely by my mother with my father as a sort of distant standard of other things. But he helped me and my sister to make books, by which I mean we put together little pamphlets of paper and drew pictures, and we would tell him a story and he would write the story on the several pages. So all of that was already was fixed in my life. And I felt reading these poems that I read early that these poets were the people I was supposed to be talking to, not my colleagues in kindergarten. And I was a pretty lonely child. I suppose that’s not uncommon. That’s the origins of poetry; it goes back as far as anything in my memory, pretty much.

My education was interrupted. I wanted to be a great artist, and I assumed I would also be a great scholar and academic. I was a great snob, so I was planning to go to a prestigious college or university. I hadn’t quite made my choice, but I felt I could go anywhere, which is probably not true. And school was what I was good at. But in my senior year, I became so profoundly anorexic that I was taken out of school by my suddenly-acquired psychoanalyst who pretty much saved my life. And so what I did when other people went to college was psychoanalysis for five, seven years, and I lived a very restricted life. It would have been perfect for now. I didn’t leave my parents’ house except to go on very regimented walks.

**PS:** Were you writing during that time?

**LG:** Yeah. I was writing seriously from the time I was seven years old. I sent out a manuscript to New York publishers when I was fifteen. It was rejected, but it was a manuscript. It exists somewhere, I think, possibly in the Beinecke. All of these pieces of paper got separated at different points. And, I was writing seriously in my late teens. I had as early as my late teens, periods in which I felt I had done my best work, and the rest was going to be downhill. And I remember my anxiety and terror as I surveyed the masterpieces of my late teens. And trust me that they were that terrible, really terrible poems. So I ended my education, but I started taking poetry workshops at Columbia General Studies—night school—and I was very fortunate in my teachers, which I think goes a long way to explaining my own passion for teaching, because it was once explained to me, you can’t thank your teachers except by performing as they did for another generation.

**PS:** You know, Louise, that comment reminds me: my real exposure to poetry was from two high school English teachers at Williamsville High School North, which is near Buffalo, New York, Lincoln and Millie Blaisdell. And they had a little poetry club that we were members of, and we went to their house and felt very grown up as 16- and 17-year-olds, drinking coffee and reading poems and writing poems. But I wanted to say is forty-seven years later, we are in COVID in this kind of lockdown environment and that poetry club is meeting over Zoom with our old English teachers!

**LG:** Really?

**PS:** And we are having a great time with each other.

**LG:** Oh, how amazing.

**PS:** What resonated is your comment about our teachers and carrying on what they inspired in us. And I so agree with you.

**LG:** Well, when I finally started teaching, which was in a moment of complete despair, but that’s another story, I was amazed at how it transformed me and nourished me. So I suppose that’s what my General Studies teachers felt also. These were very eccentric classes, as you can imagine.

**PS:** I read somewhere that you said when you read Wallace Stevens, it so overwhelmed you that it made you doubt your own ability to write poetry.

**LG:** No, I mean, I’ve been overwhelmed by many writers. But the point I was making about Stevens in that essay, he’s talking to himself, it may be true that this is simply an attribute of all meditative art, but I compare him in that essay to Eliot, whose poems demand the listener. They confide, they disclose. “Let us go then, you and I.” There’s always this listener who will make a difference, who receives the poem. And so I can read Eliot, who is to me as great a poet asthe last several centuries have produced—there are other very great poets, I wouldn’t say he’s alone—but he’s an extraordinary poet I still read with awe and was shaped by, but I did not feel silenced by in the same way that I felt silenced by Stevens. Because he [Stevens] had no need of me as a reader.

**PS:** Are other poets who moved you in one way or another, as you were developing your own approach?

**LG:** Many, and in fact, I didn’t come on the moderns until very late because I was reading older anthologies, and it was amazing to me to discover people so recent. And then when I discovered Lowell and Plath, one of whom I still revere, that was extraordinary because they were living in the world the same time I was living in the world.

But I read Keats… The strange thing is that most of the poems that I read passionately and was formed by, most of the poets, I have since—I don’t know what the right word is—*rejected*. I mean, I know them to be great, but I got to the end of what I could learn from them and somehow or other that made them uninteresting to me. Keats, Dickinson, most prominently: these were the poets I read over and over and over and over, could quote extensively from. And, now, I read Dickinson and I know how great the work is, or much of it is great. I mean, she was as utterly different from anything that had come before, as far as I know. But when I read those poems now, it’s like chalk on a blackboard. It squeaks, I can’t bear them.

**PS:** So “‘Hope’ is no longer a thing with feathers that perches on the soul”? It grates? [Laughter]

**LG:** No, it’s a great poem, it’s a great poem. I would call it to the attention of any young writer. And there are a few—“After great pain, a formal feeling comes.” That one: “First – Chill – then Stupor – then the letting go–” “Then…the…letting go…” That still, I think, is overwhelming.

**PS:** *Your* voice is unmistakable.

**LG:** Right? Yeah. [Laughter]

**PS:** Oh, I think so. And to be a fine poet and to receive the accolades that you have, you have to have an unmistakable voice, it would seem to me.

What’s so interesting to me is that your themes are so varied. Family, love, death, loss, pain, but also myth, Homer, flowers, villages. It seems like you will seize on all kinds of thoughts and feelings and images in a boundless kind of way.

**LG:** Huh? Well, thanks! [Laughter]

**PS:** That was the psychologist in me, I guess!

**LG:** I can put all of that on my gravestone, the whole thing. It’ll be a very long gravestone.

**PS:** I don’t know. Maybe your gravestone will say “Faithful and Virtuous Night.”

**LG:** Well, yeah, that was, I don’t know if you know the novels of Iris Murdoch, but I reread them and there’s, Lord knows, there’s over twenty, I’m sure, every couple of years. And *Faithful and Virtuous Night* draws from her rather arch manner. I think she’s stupendous. Amazingly, I can keep reading these books, and I still find them mesmerizing and empowering. They make me want to write. And in the last instance, they made me want to write a book that sounded as though she wrote it.

The good thing that happened to me during COVID was that I finished a book I’d been working on for a long time that I thought would never be finished, would never be any good. And it’s quite strange, dreamlike. I hope it’s OK. [Laughter] But it felt redemptive to finish it at the end of the summer, and it was a real help when I got this big, implausible prize, to have the knowledge that I had a book that was still secret, still mine. That made me calmer than I would have been otherwise. Though not calm.

**PS:** Is that part of the process? Some people—Eliot—might have said he hears a sound. Does something grip you, is there a lightning flash, or do you have to kind of push yourself through the process?

**LG:** No, I tried the “push yourself” thing. You know, in the years when I was a member of workshops, many years, I did what my students now do. I was writing a poem every week for the workshop. I don’t know how I did that, I mean, a lot of them weren’t anything that I kept. But there were periods of a sort of methodical fluency. A couple of books were written very rapidly with a kind of inspired fluency, but then most of them have taken time. Either they’ve been written in pieces, chunks, with long intervals of utter silence in between. And I’ve learned that trying to write every day at my desk, for me, is a disaster because it exacerbates my anxiety. It doesn’t calm it. It doesn’t give me a sense that I’m in the sacred place, performing the sacred, pre- performance movements. I feel the conviction of my incapability brought home so vividly that I finally learned just to give up, and that was how I started teaching. I was in the period, my first period of giving up on writing every day. I hadn’t written a poem in two years. I thought the worst has come to pass. I’m not a poet. I better find something else to do besides be a part-time secretary. And I had one book out. I was invited to do a reading at Goddard College, sort of a hippie college, in northern Vermont, and I thought, all my life I thought I was an urban person, and I didn’t like being cold, but I went to this hippie college, and it was spring, so I wasn’t cold, but it certainly wasn’t a metropolis, and I got off the bus. And I suddenly I had this overwhelming feeling that I was supposed to stay there. And I was there four days. There were amazing poets at this colloquium. [John] Berryman was there, and of the living poets at that point, he was the one I liked best. And he was quite something. Horrible, but magnificent, but mean as a skunk. Well defended is what he was, but he was also mean, but I tried to deliver my homage, and I was treated as some sort of dull-witted chickie who was, you know, trying to climb the ladder. And that seemed laughable to me. And we ended up with some sort of mutual regard, I would say.

But I stayed, as I said, four days, and I became more and more convinced that these were my people. I don’t mean Berryman and the lot who had been invited to read. I mean, the people who did the inviting, who invited me. And two of those people became lifelong friends.

**PS:** And this experience motivated your interest in teaching?

**LG:** Well, what happened was at the last sort of drunken party, they said you have to come here and teach. And I had foresworn teaching. I had in my head a long list of things poets shouldn’t do. They shouldn’t teach. I had come to this moment at which I thought I wasn’t an artist and suddenly these people in this magical place said you should come here and teach. And I said yes. Then I realized subsequently, of course, they weren’t empowered to offer me a job, these drunken English temporaries.

But it turned out Goddard being what it was, that some one-semester job was improvised for me over the summer, and I moved up there from Provincetown, where I’d been for two years, which I hated. I moved up to a rooming house in rural Vermont. And four days later, I met my first class. And I had always thought if I were teaching talented people that my enviousness would act. I would be malign as a teacher, I would suppress everything in them that was exciting and fresh, and I would encourage the commonplace and conventional. I feared that.

**PS:** Your students do not describe you that way, at all.

**LG:** No, well, it wasn’t the case. I found—and I wasn’t writing my own stuff at all—and they were writing, a couple of them, quite fascinating poems, and one is now actually a very well-known, prominent Canadian poet named Roo Borson. But I found that I, I felt exactly as I felt working on my own stuff, that I was in service to the poem, and anything I could figure out that would make that a stronger work of art I did. And so I was not the teacher that I had feared.

And the other thing that happened was I started writing. After two years of nothing. And it seemed to me that teaching was absolutely connected to that, what seemed like a rebirth. And it still seems to me a way of getting away from your own shame and into the world. And it’s been miraculous in my life. I mean, writing has been intermittently, I mean, it’s the great thing, but it isn’t always there, whereas I can always teach. And it was amazing to discover that this was the case.

**PS:** Well, your students at Yale say that you are committed. They adore you. They love you. It’s been seventeen years of teaching at Yale.

**LG:** I know. And it was twenty at Williams.

**PS:** I noticed at Yale you love to teach, it appears, that you love to teach first-year students.

**LG:** I do!

**PS:** Tell me about that. I also taught first-year students in introductory psychology for years and years, and I’d be interested in why, from your point of view, it’s so much fun to teach these newbies.

**LG:**  Because if they have good minds, the class may start out to be really grim, with nobody writing anything that isn’t deadwood, and you’re stuck in this regimen of discussing three poems or four poems a week, and it’s painful because you can’t praise these terrible poems. There was one particular class that ended up being stellar, but for the first, say, six weeks, nobody wrote anything that was any good. People wrote good lines, and you could talk about the line and why the line was so exhilarating, but nobody was writing much at all. And I could see that they were ready to live with this for a couple of weeks, but as we moved into the fifth and six weeks, a kind of hopelessness was descending on the group. And then, one student, Evan Walker-Wells, who is now at law school, wrote an *astonishing* poem, a sort of tour de force persona poem. And usually those are wretched. But this was inspired, and everybody knew it. And we read the poem in class and then we all applauded—everybody. And everything in the room changed. It didn’t matter how many great poems they were reading, the books that they were reading every week. I realized that somebody in the room had to write a real poem for them to believe that it was possible. And within two weeks, almost everybody in that room had written something of interest. So it was an amazing experience.

**PS:** So it was a moment that released them in a way?

**LG:** Evan’s poem made them believe that it was possible. Because he had been writing dreadfully also. And everything changed, and the class became one of the most marvelous I ever taught. Everybody’s so different, writing so differently. And I’m no judge of what their relations are outside of class because they’re good at simulating collegial warmth, or they don’t want to intrude their antipathies. But I felt they genuinely liked each other, and we had a party at the end in somebody’s apartment. It was a lark. I mean, the beginning was terrible, really terrible, but after that moment, everything was—this is a terrible analogy, but when I was little, I used to watch these Disney movies of speeded-up flowers opening, and that’s what they were like, they were like those speeded-up flowers.

**PS:** Every teacher lives for those transformative moments in the classroom.

**LG:** Yeah.

**PS:** That’s what keeps us all teaching, right? It’s amazing.

Let me let me go back to your poetry. I want to take you back about twenty years, a little less than twenty years ago. And you’re in one of the churches on the New Haven Green. You’re in the company of all the living Bollingen Prize winners.

**LG:**  That’s right.

**PS:** Which has to be an astounding array of poets, and you’re reading to them your poem, “October.”

**LG:** There were poets there I admired passionately, some who were my friends, one who was my teacher. Not all of them do I admire passionately. So for me, it was a mixed bag, but it was clearly a mixed bag of eminences. I was the most recent winner, and I read a new poem, which I had read once or twice before. But I was a little jittery about it. And then I was also lame because a good friend of mine had moved from Cambridge to New Haven, and we had been having coffee earlier in the day at Starbucks. And I was waiting in line to order and a woman in a wheelchair backed her wheelchair over my foot. So I was in a lot of pain and having a lot of anxiety that my foot had been broken, which it hadn’t. So it was a difficult reading for me. And I had no idea how the poem sounded, but then I got a letter from Dick Broadhead inviting me to teach, apparently initiated by that poem.

**PS:** Wow.

**LG:** I’m proud of it, now, very proud of it. In fact, I’m proud of that whole book. I think it’s certainly one of the best things I’ve ever done. But, you know, the past is always a reprimand. When it was the present, it was terrifying, and I wasn’t sure of it, and when my judgment about it solidified, it became a reprimand—sort of no good period; insecurity to chastisement.

**PS:** But maybe that’s what makes you such an effective teacher. Your students recognize how great your work is and the lifetime that it represents, but there’s this underlying humility, and they’re struggling to look a self-confident, but they also know how they actually feel, which is not.

**LG:**  I don’t think it’s humility, I think it’s shame, which is a little different because humility would suggest a sort of modest assessment. I vacillate between extremities. I remember when I was in my 20s, married to my first husband, and I wrote very quickly a poem that was—I mean, my first book is nothing to write home about—but there’s one, I think, quite beautiful little poem in it, and I wrote that poem when I was about nineteen, twenty. I guess we weren’t married, but I came out of the bedroom, and I said, “Charlie”—I shouldn’t tell you what I said, but I made great claims for the poem, bold claims. And Charlie, subsequently, whenever we were with other people at a party or something, he would say, “Louise, why don’t you recite that poem you called ‘the great encomium followed,’” and I was greatly embarrassed. But the point is, I went from feeling that something was a masterpiece to it was appalling that I ever entertained such a thought. So that’s a lot of reeling around, and I think that’s what my students do. I think they feel, in moments, great pride, great waves of “there’s no limit to what I can do.” And then they feel the corrective: “I’m an idiot, I’m a fool, how could I have ever, ever thought such a thing about *this*?” And thinking of their own work. But I think if they know that about me, which I’m sure comes out generally in the span of a class, then they know, oh, well, you can have a real career in letters and still feel shame and humiliation and horror at your attempts. But that’s not the same as humility. I don’t think I’ve had a humble moment in my life.

**PS:** I love that. I love your explanation of shame because shame so often leads people to be angry.

**LG:** Oh, yeah.

**PS:** That expressing anger is the best way to relieve your shame. So if you embarrass somebody, humiliate somebody, they respond angrily. In part, that’s to relieve their shame. But that’s not what’s happening in your classroom. They’re experiencing the shame and realizing it’s okay.

**LG:** It’s not the verdict it appears to be.

**PS:** Yeah.

**LG:** Or it may not be. Every once in a while, the shame sticks, you know. But then you’re ashamed of your estimate, not just the shoddy work, but that you thought for a moment that it was not.

**PS:** You’re ashamed of your bad judgment, bad self-judgment. [Laughter]

**LG:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**PS:** I read somewhere you’re saying that listening to poetry is difficult because if you succumb to the music, you missed the meaning. And if you seek the meaning, you miss the music.

**LG:** Oh, I hate listening. I really do. I don’t hear well when I listen, and I think the poets who write for the spoken word, I think, qualities get emphasized at the expense of what only the page can deliver. On a page, if a word has multiple meanings, you can see them, you feel the whole range of meanings of a particular word will be present to you. In a reading the reader has to decide among the various options that that prism of the word affords. The poet has to decide on one way to do it, emphasizing one particular quality. And the reading is…it can sound beautiful, it can sound more beautiful than it actually is. It masks defects in the poem that the writer should be aware of because the writer could take some perhaps, but it also simplifies the poem. It may dramatize it, but it simplifies it. And that makes me angry. And I don’t want the reader’s personality substituted for the poem. I don’t like that intersession. I want the experience of the poem. And whatever the voice of the poem is, I want to hear it, and I hear better reading.

**PS:** Is this partly why in formats like this one, a podcast, you’re reluctant to read?

**LG:** Yeah, I think my work doesn’t do well read. And I certainly don’t want to read into a telephone in an empty house.

**PS:** Yeah.

**LG:** At least when you’re reading to an audience, you’re speaking to someone. The act of speech is associated with a recipient, but I’m reading to the chairs here.

**PS:** Yeah. There are there are pieces on YouTube where you are reading.

**LG:** I know, and I had no control over them.

**PS:** Would you have preferred that they were just not there?

**LG:** Yeah, I would erase all of them if I could, but I can’t. I hardly ever do readings anymore. I mean, I do them at schools where I teach if I’m asked to. And once in a while, if I have a new book, I’ll do a reading, but it used to be a real source of revenue. And it isn’t so much anymore, or at least not for someone of my years.

**PS:** Well, perhaps it’s because there’s so much on YouTube. I don’t mean necessarily of you, but people can sit in front of their computer and watch all kinds of things for absolutely nothing.

**LG:** I have no idea. I just know that as soon as I was in a financial position to give it up, I gave it up.

**PS:** So let me ask a final question. I don’t quite know how to say this where it doesn’t sound completely trite, but what is the future of poetry?Are young students as passionate as their predecessors?

**LG:** I don’t know that I would dare generalize, but there are still…well, there’s a lot of crap written that gets published, which I find extremely discouraging.

**PS:** This, by the way, is your candor coming through, to reference the earlier poem “October” that we talked about.

**LG:** Well, no, you have no idea what I would actually say.

**PS:** [Laughter]OK, you’re holding back on me here a little bit.

**LG:** Yeah, I am. I’m protecting my job. The thing about poetry is how durable it is. There will always be people for whom that is the language, and the hope is that they will depart from that which already exists and invent new things, and the longer you live, the more new things you get to be exposed to. So I’m excited when that happens. And I have students of immense talent; they also have immense talent in other fields, so it’s hard to know what will happen to them. There are always people. There are periods in which there are more and periods in which there are fewer, but I don’t worry for poetry. I mean, I worry for human life. It might be that the planet is about to go to the viruses. But I don’t worry for poetry.

**PS:** You know, I have a brother in theater, and I have friends in opera, and they all worry that the audience for these art forms is aging and that the future may be quite different. But maybe poetry is it is exceptional in that sense.

**LG:** Poetry is done by one person. And the thing about poetry is that you may not have an audience in your time, but your work may find an audience later. I mean, historically, that’s been true. Hard to speculate about stuff like that. But I look at the work that my students do. You know, there’s classes that are extraordinary and classes that are…less extraordinary, but there’s never been a class in which there’s been nobody who wrote things that surprised me and excited me.

**PS:** Isn’t that nice to hear? Louise, thank you for doing this. Let me just say, so many Yalies you’ve taught over the last sixteen, seventeen years who know your work and are incredibly proud of you and they’re just so grateful. I think your students bask in reflected glory.

Yale is known for a great college within a great research university. It’s known as a place where the arts are cherished, where creativity and teaching go hand in hand, where the great poet in your class might also be the great mathematician in somebody else’s class. I think that’s what keeps us coming back for more here, but that idea where creativity and teaching can go hand in hand—I think you exemplify that as well as anyone I know on our faculty, and I just have to personally thank you for bringing your gifts to Yale and your genuineness, your commitment to our students. It’s inspiring to all of us, even those of us who have been around students and teaching for all our lives. You are such a refreshing voice in so many ways.

**LG:** Well, I get a lot back from it.

**PS:** And that’s great to hear. Louise, thank you, thank you so much.

**LG:** Thank you.

**PS:** And once again, congratulations.

**LG:** Thank you very much.

**PS:** Take care, Louise.

**LG:** Bye-bye.

**PS:** Thank you so much. Bye-bye.

And now I’m delighted to share with you Louise’s reading of her poem, “October.” She read this poem in 2002, in one of the churches on the New Haven Green in the company of all the living Bollingen Prize winners.

[Recording of Louise Glück reading her poem, “October.]