LEAVE-TAKING: Critic Jane Tylus compares the gesture of Saint Peter in a Renaissance painting by Sano di Pietro to the “posture of the poet who is trying to say goodbye to a poem but hasn’t sent it off yet.”

**Parting Words**

Literary critic Jane Tylus considers Renaissance rituals of separation—and why bidding farewell was so hard.

By Kathleen McCarvey

Saying good-bye—in life and in art—isn’t easy. For Jane Tylus, a professor of Italian studies and comparative literature at New York University, the idea that there’s a convergence between both forms of parting became clear when she saw a 15th-century painting that she describes as “probably the most beautiful and thought-provoking poem” she had ever seen.

It was Concedo della Vergine, by Sano di Pietro, at Villa I Tatti, near Florence. “This gesture of Saint Peter, who knows what is in front of him, but isn’t ready to go in just yet—this, to me, captures the posture of the poet who is ready to say good-bye to a poem but hasn’t sent it off yet,” says Tylus, who also is faculty director of the NYU Center for the Humanities.

Saint Peter, she says, the artist stands before a work, declaring, “‘I’m about to say good-bye—but not yet. I can’t bear to say good-bye yet.’”

The painting led Tylus to what she calls a “new way of thinking” about “what a lot of visual and literary art is doing in the Renaissance.”

As this year’s keynote speaker for the Ferrari Humanities Symposia, Tylus outlined some of her new ways of thinking about the role of art—and how we say good-bye to loved ones.

**HUMANITIES**

**Ferrari Humanities Symposia**

Jane Tylus was the 2016 keynote speaker this spring for the Ferrari Humanities Symposia, an annual event designed to highlight the broad interdisciplinary connections that are fundamental to a liberal arts education.

Tylus is the director of NYU’s Center for the Humanities and a professor of Italian studies and comparative literature.

University Trustee Bernard Ferrari ’70, ’74M (MD) and his wife, Linda Gaddis Ferrari, established the symposium to broaden the liberal education of the University’s undergraduates, graduate students, and other scholars from around the world. Established in 2012, the series has hosted speakers including Anthony Grafton and Stephen Greenblatt.

—Kathleen McCarvey

The topic of Tylus’s keynote address was spurred by personal experience: coming to terms with her private sadness about how contemporary beliefs and practices surrounding loss differ from what they were centuries ago.

A practicing Catholic, Tylus says she realized that “in my life, there’s a lot more continuity with the Middle Ages. There are sharp differences that Protestantism introduced to Catholic practices of not really saying good-bye.”

With the Protestant Reformation came enormous departures from Catholic religious practice, including a rejection of the idea of purgatory, where souls would be purified before ascending to heaven. Practices such as allowing the living to shorn, through paying for indulgences, the dead’s time in purgatory meant that relationships continued, in some fashion, after death, Tylus says.

At the same time, artists were carrying on a long poetic tradition of parting from the work itself and considering what might happen to it once it leaves them.

Michelangelo’s unfinished, unfinished, sculptures for the tomb of Pope Julius II—unfinished—are one example Tylus points to of a similar phenomenon in the visual arts. The figures “look like they’re imprisoned in their own art,” she says. Late in his life, Michelangelo wrote a series of sonnets about his art’s lack of value when it comes to life beyond death. “It’s a kind of rejection of the meaning he’s had as an artist, as he’s also saying good-bye to that life itself in his poems,” she says.

Produced a century later, Shakespeare’s work is “fuddled with questions about when and how we say good-bye to loved ones,” she says. One particularly well-known example is Polonius’s comically excessive leave-taking from son Laertes in *Hamlet,* but Tylus finds particular meaning in the famous closing speech of Shakespeare’s final play, *The Tempest.* Prospero implores the audience to “release me from my bands/With the help of your good hands.”

“There’s a real sense that Prospero is going to die and is calling to the audience for life beyond death,” she says.

For Michelangelo, who was heavily influenced by some tenets of the Reformation, these radically new ideas struck at the roots of a sense of enduring human community extending beyond death.

What was at stake, Tylus says, was nothing less than “the worth of art in a human community extending beyond death.”