The Language of Emily Dickinson

Edited by

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Series in Literary Studies
# Table of Contents

List of Tables \hspace{1cm} v

List of Figures \hspace{1cm} v

Acknowledgments \hspace{1cm} vii

Introduction \hspace{1cm} ix

Chapter 1  **Dickinson's Breath of Life** 1  
Cynthia L. Hallen  
*Brigham Young University*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abstract</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emily Dickinson and Noah Webster's Collocations</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Digital Account of Emily Dickinson's Nouns</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily Dickinson's Person Names</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily Dickinson's Kennings</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metonymy in Emily Dickinson's Verse</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love, Light, and the Breath of Life</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix C</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix D</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Further Reading</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chapter 2  **“Syllables of Velvet, Sentences of Plush”: Emily Dickinson as Polyglot** 65  
Nicole Panizza  
*Coventry University*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abstract</th>
<th>65</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spatial Improvisations – Emily Dickinson's “Lyric Communications”</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dickinson's Music Training</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dickinson's Music-Making in the Home</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bilingual Practice</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“In adequate Music there is a Major and a Minor”</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“I can improvise better at night” – Emily Dickinson’s “riffs”  
Works Cited  

Chapter 3  
**The Notorious E.E.D.: Rap in the Poems of Emily Dickinson**  
Holly Norton  
*University of Northwestern Ohio*  

Abstract  
Works Cited  

Chapter 4  
**“Some seek in Art –”: Language and Literary Influence in Fascicle 30**  
Trisha Kannan  
*Independent Scholar*  

Abstract  
What Are the Fascicles?  
Fascicle 30 and Literary Influence  
Sheet Four: Immortal Poets and Sources of Inspiration  
Sheet Five: Poems of Nature and Experience  
Sheet Six: The Power of Pain  
Sheet One: Nature's Ephemeral Beauty  
Sheet Two: Poetic Inspiration and the Power of Language  
Sheet Three: The Power of Failure  
Conclusion  
Works Cited  
Further Reading  

Index
List of Tables

Table 1.3 Top 50 High-Frequency Nouns Occurring in Dickinson's Poems and Letters 7
Table 1.4 Most Frequent Person Name Headwords by Categories and Examples 11
Table 1.5 Most Frequent Proper Nouns by Number of Occurrences in Dickinson's Poems 12
Table 1.1 Catalogue of Emily Dickinson's Quoted Material 19
Table 1.2 Sample of Emily Dickinson's Language Features 38
Table 1.6 Sample of Emily Dickinson's Kennings 47
Table 1.7 Sample of Emily Dickinson's Metonymies 51

List of Figures

Figure 2.1 EDR 469. Houghton Library, Harvard University. “Di Tanti Palpiti” with variations, Edward L. White – Bars 1-10. 83
Figure 2.2 EDR 469. Houghton Library, Harvard University. Kreutzer's “Overture to Lodoiska,” arr. By Charles Czerny (piano duet) – Secondo, Bars 18-32. 83
Figure 2.3 “We talked with each other about each other,” in Emily Dickinson Collection, Box 6, Folder 52, Amherst College Archives and Special Collections, Amherst College Library 84
Acknowledgments

This collection would not exist without the expertise, patience, and generosity of Emily Seelbinder, professor emerita of English and Creative Writing at Queens University of Charlotte. The editors are tremendously grateful for the time and effort she dedicated to preparing these essays for publication. The editors would also like to thank the Emily Dickinson International Society (EDIS), which has been a steady source of inspiration, support, and collegiality for years. Much of the scholarship the writers relied on to produce these essays stems from EDIS members, many of whom have become mentors, colleagues, and friends after so many annual meetings and conferences, always filled with lively debates and discussions and a shared love of all things Emily Dickinson. Finally, the editors recognize the important contribution of the South Atlantic Modern Language Association (SAMLA). The idea for a collection exploring the language of Emily Dickinson derived from a 2019 panel on the subject, and SAMLA’s conference organizers always work tirelessly to create an inclusive, collaborative environment to promote diverse scholarship that is accessible and available to a wider audience.

I would also like to thank Dr. Robyn Bell, whose course on Dickinson’s fascicles during my time as an undergraduate in the College of Creative Studies at UC Santa Barbara changed my life. Prior to Dr. Bell’s class, I had an image in my head of Dickinson as a hoarder of poems; her texts were so difficult because they were akin to conversations Dickinson was having with herself. I did not know about the fascicles, nor did I know that she circulated hundreds of poems with her letters. I had never conceived of attending graduate school until that class, and then I could not imagine doing anything else. At the time, Dr. Bell knew much more about academia than I did, and she expressed concern that graduate school would “ruin” Dickinson for me, which very nearly was the case. But the people at EDIS revived and sustained me, particularly Eleanor Heginbotham, Alexandra Socarides, Martha Nell Smith, and Emily Seelbinder. Marianne Noble and Dan Manheim spent considerable time offering feedback on an early version of my Fascicle 30 essay, and I am eternally grateful. As Martha Ackmann writes in These Fevered Days: Ten Pivotal Moments in the Making of Emily Dickinson, “There is no doubt she is a towering poetic voice. But there’s something else about her too. Emily Dickinson reminds us what it’s like to be alive” (xxiii). The goal of this collection is to clarify Dickinson’s language, yet her allure goes beyond writing memorable, captivating, powerful poems; there is something indescribable and indecipherable about her work that calls to us and keeps us coming back for more.
Introduction

This collection brings together renowned and independent scholars who are captivated by the ways in which Emily Dickinson used words. The authors revel in the difficulty of her language, in its component parts, its visceral effects, its sounds and flavors. The essays delve into a variety of subjects centered around how Dickinson manipulated language, providing fresh insight and new ways of thinking about a poet who has been at the center of the American literary canon for more than a century. One need not be a Dickinson expert to appreciate this collection, however. The writers translate Dickinson's difficulty into language that is accessible and informative for advanced scholars and general readers alike.

Cynthia L. Hallen, associate professor of linguistics at Brigham Young University and creator of the invaluable Emily Dickinson Lexicon, opens the collection with her essay “Dickinson's Breath of Life.” An in-depth exploration of Dickinson's language features, this chapter seeks to explain how Dickinson's linguistic choices created such powerful poems. Hallen analyzes the role of direct quotation, lexical collocates, nouns, person names, kennings, and metonymy in Dickinson's work. The result is a better understanding of how Dickinson achieved her goal of creating living verses that breathe vital light and love into all who read them.

Nicole Panizza, distinguished pianist and assistant professor of music at Coventry University, explores Dickinson's relationship to music in “‘Syllables of Velvet, Sentences of Plush’: Emily Dickinson as Polyglot.” Exploring Dickinson's musical background and deciphering the pivotal place of music in Dickinson's artistic process as only a musician could, Panizza argues that Dickinson is a polyglot, a person with knowledge of and the ability to move between multiple languages. Dickinson was not an “industry professional,” of course, but she was an accomplished pianist with a deep affinity for the sounds, sensations, and understanding that only music could bring. Panizza also provides a fascinating look at the intersections between Dickinson and jazz, detailing how contemporary musicians find inspiration in Dickinson's work.

Holly Norton, author of the poetry collection Letting Go and professor of English at the University of Northwestern Ohio, explores the connections between nineteenth-century poetry and twentieth-century rap lyrics in “The Notorious E.E.D.: Rap in the Poems of Emily Dickinson.” Norton focuses on the work of the Notorious B.I.G. and Tupac to show thematic similarities to Dickinson regarding death, the afterlife, and the power of poetry. Norton recognizes the disparities in the lives of Dickinson and rappers such as the
Notorious B.I.G. and Tupac, but her articulation of the ways in which their poetic ideas intersect provides an enlightening new way of thinking about the poetry of Emily Dickinson and the transcendent power of language.

Trisha Kannan, writer, editor, and independent scholar, contributes to the growing body of fascicle scholarship in “‘Some seek in Art –’: Language and Literary Influence in Fascicle 30.” By closely analyzing the poems Dickinson placed in Fascicle 30, Kannan locates specific correlations to the work of John Keats that have remained unexamined. In particular, Kannan explores how the fascicle contains “echoes,” to borrow Elizabeth Petrino’s apt term, of several of Keats's poems, including “Nature and the Poets,” “Fancy,” “Fairy Song,” “Bards of Passion and of Mirth,” “Ode to a Nightingale,” and “To Autumn.” Observing these echoes reveals thematic strains that Dickinson shared with Keats about the power of art, poetic inspiration, and the joyful and painful events of human life.

Following the approach of Dickinson editors and scholarship of the past few decades, this collection renders Dickinson's manuscripts into print without too much editorial intrusion, which means Dickinson's misspellings and grammatical errors have been left as they are without the addition of sic. The editors believe Dickinson does not need to be “fixed” and that her poetry simply wouldn't be the same if she had not decided that “upon” should be spelled “opon.”
Chapter 1

Dickinson's Breath of Life

Cynthia L. Hallen
Brigham Young University

Abstract

Emily Dickinson lived in the noon of a philological renaissance that inspired several nineteenth-century scholars and authors to think of human language as an organic manifestation of human life. Her awareness of the life of language is apparent in the first letter she sent to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, in which she asked: “Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?” (L260, 15 April 1862). This essay documents how the poet’s verses are alive lexically and semantically. Scholars have explored Dickinson’s style, grammar, biblical allusions, classical strategies, cognitive patterns, elliptical constructions, and rhetorical figures. This essay considers additional language features that enable Dickinson’s words to breathe distinctly, including collocations, etymologies, merisms, kennings, pairs, proper nouns, quoted material, word frequencies, and webplays between Dickinson’s diction and Noah Webster’s dictionary.

Key words: philology, language features, webplay

Emily Dickinson lived in the noon of a philological renaissance that inspired several nineteenth-century scholars to think of human language as a vital and living manifestation of Nature. In an 1851 essay on the distinction of words, English philologist Richard C. Trench wrote that words have “a body and a soul.” Scholars like Trench believed that human language developed in an “organic” way and that the tree of language was a natural outgrowth of word roots (Gura 117–118). The organic image of language as a living tree growing up from life-giving word roots influenced New England literary authors and poets (Gura 138–141), including Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, and Emily Dickinson. Thoreau wrote that a written word “is the work of art nearest to life itself” that may not “only be read but actually breathed from all human lips” (355). Whitman wrote that the etymology of words is “the history of Nature . . . and of the organic Universe;” he believed that words become vitalized “in the mind that enters on their study” (572). In one of her verses, Dickinson asserted
that a word “begins to live” when it is spoken (Fr278), and in another poem she wrote that “a Vital Word / Came all the way from Life to me” (Fr996).

Emily Dickinson’s awareness of the vitality of language is apparent throughout her poems and letters. In the first letter she sent to scholar Thomas W. Higginson, she asked, “Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?” (L260, 15 April 1862). She continued that if Higginson were to reply that her words “breathed,” her gratitude would be “quick,” an adjective that Noah Webster defined as “living” in the etymological sense and “speedy” in the derivative sense. For Dickinson, words were vibrant and immediate; they had “an existence, a power, an autonomy of their own” (Sewall 77). More than 150 years later, scholars such as Erika Scheurer attest to the immediacy of language in Dickinson’s poetry. Her poems are still alive with words that breathe “distinctly” because of the “Cohesive” language choices in her “loved Philology” (Fr1715).

Dickinson would have learned about the importance of living language as a student in the Classical track at Amherst Academy. In his rhetoric textbook, Samuel Newman explained that a good writing style depends on the quality of “vivacity” and declared that a “happy choice of words” is the key to achieving liveliness in language (164). Newman elaborated on effective word choice, stating that vivacity implies that “thoughts are exhibited with distinctness before the mind of the reader” (164). Writers may achieve vivacity by using “specific” words and phrases that “convey a more full and distinct meaning to the mind” than that which is conveyed by generic terms (164). He went on to identify several more strategies for achieving vivacity: language figures, unusual word orders, elliptical omissions, special sentence structures, verb tense changes, and direct quotations in narration (165–178).

Whether intentionally or instinctively, Dickinson employed many of Newman’s vivacious language strategies in her poetry. For example, she incorporated direct quotation of published materials into the fabric of her verse, and she used seven kinds of quotations for various functions: to punctuate dialogue, to show emphasis, to highlight figurative usage, to foreground humor, to identify literary allusions, to mark names, and to quote herself. Dickinson used single or double quotation marks in 223 out of 1,789 poems; the usage is most frequent in her earlier poems from 1850–1862. The most frequent function of quotation marks was for direct quotation of literary works, many of which are Biblical allusions. The second-highest category of quotation usage was for dialogue, and the third-highest was for emphasizing a

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1 See also L379.
2 *Emily Dickinson Lexicon* (EDL), http://edl.byu.edu/webster/term/1301652.
Index

2

A
Ackmann, Martha, vii, 102, 109, 111, 117
afterlife, ix, 102, 103, 104, 105, 113, 115
allusions, 2, 3, 11, 15, 129
Amaral, Ana Luísa, 67, 98
Amherst Academy, 2, 4, 13, 62, 69, 77, 79
analogy, 3
Anderson, Susan M., 140, 145

B
Baker, James V., 92, 98
Balmer, Paul, 95, 98
Becker, Alton, 7, 61
belief, 6, 7, 103, 106, 124, 129
bells, 88, 93, 141
Bennett, Fordyce R., 3
Bennett, Paula, 62, 103, 117
Benvenuto, Richard, 4, 62
Bianchi, Martha Dickinson, 4, 10, 61, 69, 95, 98
Bible, 7, 12, 62, 122
Biblical, 2, 3, 11, 12
Bingham, Millicent Todd, 76, 98
birdsong, 47, 50, 86, 88, 92, 133
Boxall, Peter, 115, 117
Boziwick, George, 79, 94, 96, 98
Brantley, Richard, 127, 147
Brashear, Lucy, 9, 10, 61
Bray, Robert, 124, 147
Browning, Elizabeth Barrett, 74, 93, 123, 127, 129, 130, 131, 132, 138, 141, 145, 146
Buckingham, Willis, 4, 62
Budick, E. Miller, 3, 62
Burbick, Joan, 3, 62

C
Calvinism, 70, 80, 103, 107, 117
Cambon, Glauco, 127, 147
Cameron, Sharon, 124, 145
Capps, Jack, 144, 145
Carlson, Eric W., 140, 145
Carton, Evan, 127, 147
Cato, 11, 13
Chambers, Robert, 15, 99, 128, 145
Child, Lydia Maria, 47, 75, 98
Christ, 12, 15, 16, 18, 39, 47, 52, 53, 102, 104, 122, 137, 139, 143
Christianity, 102, 104, 107
Civil War, 87, 109, 111
colocation, 3, 5
Crumbley, Paul, 62, 95, 98, 124, 145
Cuddy, Lois A., 3, 62

D
Dana, Charles, 128, 132, 133, 134, 135, 139, 141, 143, 145
death, ix, 4, 6, 8, 9, 10, 15, 18, 22, 47, 48, 49, 70, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 92, 93, 101, 104, 105, 106, 111,
Dickinson, Austin, 4, 11, 35, 76, 78, 95, 111, 122, 128
Dickinson, Edward, 4, 13, 71
Diehl, Joanne Feit, 127, 134, 146, 147
direct quotation, ix, 2, 145
Dobson, Joanne, 108, 117
Doreski, William, 124, 147
dream, 48, 133, 140, 142
drum, 86, 87, 88
Dyson, Michael Eric, 107, 117

E
Eberwein, Jane Donahue, 4, 61, 99, 103, 107, 111, 117, 118
Edwards, Walter, 111, 112, 113, 117
Ellis, Aimé J., 109, 117
Emerson, Ralph Waldo, 18, 102, 127, 129, 139, 147
Emily Dickinson Lexicon, ix, 2, 14, 15, 17, 61, 90, 99, 146
England, Martha Winburn, 71, 74, 99

F
Farr, Judith, 117, 118, 121, 122, 146
fascicles, vii, x, 3, 62, 79, 119, 120, 121, 122, 123, 124, 125, 126, 128, 129, 130, 132, 133, 134, 135, 136, 137, 139, 140, 142, 143, 144, 145, 146, 147
fingering, 82
Flores, Kate, 140, 146
Franklin, R. W., 10, 19, 38, 47, 51, 61, 88, 98, 116, 120, 121, 122, 123, 124, 125, 126, 130, 142, 145, 146
Freeman, Margaret H., 3, 62
Fuss, Diana, 75, 99

G
Gall, Sally M., 124, 147
Garland, Roland, 4, 62
Gilbert, Sandra M., 100, 104, 111, 117, 121, 128
God, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 15, 24, 47, 48, 51, 52, 71, 91, 102, 103, 104, 105, 106, 107, 115, 116, 117, 118, 132
Gribbin, Laura, 127, 147
Guerra, Jonnie G., 140, 146
guns, 107, 108, 110, 115, 118
Gura, Philip E., 1, 61

H
Hagenbüchle, Roland, 3, 62, 117
Hamilton, Craig, 3, 62
Hart, Ellen Louise, 67, 99
Hasse, John E., 94, 99
Heginbotham, Eleanor, vii, 62, 122, 123, 145, 146
Herbarium, 79, 85, 99
Hiberno-English, 66
Higginson, T. W., 2, 4, 85, 113, 121, 125, 127, 128, 130, 146
high-frequency words, 7
hooks, bell, 107, 108, 114, 117
Howard, William, 3, 62
Hubbard, Melanie, 3, 62
hymn, 29, 30, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 89
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Index</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>immortality, 17, 36, 47, 48, 102, 103, 105, 106, 107, 110, 113, 114, 116, 119, 129, 130, 132, 137, 138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>improvisation, 95, 97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackson, Virginia, 93, 99, 126, 127, 134, 135, 146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jazz, ix, 94, 95, 96, 97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juhasz, Suzanne, 3, 61, 108, 117, 118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keats, John, x, 20, 93, 119, 123, 127, 128, 129, 130, 131, 132, 133, 134, 135, 136, 139, 141, 143, 144, 146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keller, Karl, 127, 137, 146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kenning, 14, 15, 17, 51, 52, 54, 58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knox, Helene Margrethe, 16, 61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kubrin, Charis E., 112, 113, 118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lathrop, Tad, 99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leyda, Jay, 76, 77, 99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lindberg-Seyersted, 3, 62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loeffelholz, Mary, 93, 99, 134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lord, 12, 15, 30, 34, 47, 51, 105, 128, 137, 142, 143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lundin, Roger, 102, 103, 118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthews, Cerys, 68, 99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McDowell, Marta, 77, 99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McMahon, April M. S., 16, 61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McNaughton, Ruth Flanders, 93, 99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>metaphor, 6, 13, 14, 15, 16, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 86, 87, 88, 90, 91, 92, 93, 97, 110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>metonymy, ix, 16, 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miller, Cristanne, 3, 62, 68, 73, 87, 99, 111, 117, 118, 126, 139, 140, 141, 145, 146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miller, Ruth, 125, 146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monte, Steven, 3, 62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, 13, 69, 75, 102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murray, Aife, 66, 99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>music binder, 80, 94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>names, 2, 10, 11, 12, 13, 17, 131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nature, x, 1, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 18, 29, 49, 66, 70, 74, 76, 77, 80, 82, 86, 89, 90, 92, 93, 97, 102, 103, 110, 119, 121, 127, 128, 129, 131, 134, 136, 139, 141, 143, 144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newman, Samuel Phillips, 2, 61, 94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>noun, 3, 5, 6, 7, 14, 15, 16, 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O’Maley, Carrie, 140, 146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oberhaus, Dorothy Huff, 122, 147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>organ, 86, 89, 92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paglia, Camille, 95, 99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pareles, Jon, 115, 118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pellegrinelli, Lara, 96, 97, 99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>person name, ix, 3, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petrino, Elizabeth, x, 127, 128, 129, 131, 132, 135, 145, 146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phillips, Elizabeth, 61, 67, 99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
philology, 2, 17, 18, 62
piano, 68, 69, 75, 76, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 85, 86, 91, 94, 95, 96
poetic inspiration, x, 119, 126, 134, 140
polyglot, ix, 65, 95

Q
Quinn, Eithne, 96, 105, 118

R
Reglin, Louise Winn, 87, 99
Rich, Adrienne, 91, 100
Rockstro, William S., 90, 100
Romney, Rebecca, 14, 15, 61, 138
Rosenthal, M. L., 124, 147
Ross, Christine, 3, 62
Rossetti, Christina, 6, 61

S
Scheurer, Erika, 2, 62
Scheurich, Neil, 102, 103, 106, 110, 118
Severn, Joseph, 127, 130, 132, 146
Sewall, Richard B., 2, 4, 61, 94, 100, 102, 118
Sharon-Zisser, Shirley, 3, 63
Short, Bryan, 7, 61, 66, 72, 100
Shurr, William, 121, 147
singing, 17, 51, 69, 70, 75, 76, 78, 80, 87, 93
Small, Judy Jo, 3, 63, 78, 100
Socarides, Alexandra, vii, 125, 126, 146
St. Armand, Barton Levi, 88, 100
Steiner, George, 4, 61
Stevenson, Bryan, 107, 118
Swyderski, Ann, 123, 146

T
The Notorious B.I.G., 105, 107, 109, 118
Thoreau, Henry David, 1, 18, 61, 102
Tinajero, Robert, 104, 112, 118
Trench, Richard Chenevix, 1, 63

V
Van Loon, Hendrik Willem, 77, 100
vitality, 2, 3, 10, 13, 116

W
Wardrop, Daneen, 114, 115, 118, 124, 146
Watkins, Calvert, 14, 61
Watts, Isaac, 21, 26, 29, 36, 71, 72, 73, 74, 100
webplay, 5, 6
Webster, Noah, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 16, 25, 61, 62, 89, 92, 100, 136, 147
Werning, Marcus, 7, 62
Whicher, George, 77, 100
White, Fred, 66, 100
Whitman, Walt, 1, 62, 102
Willis, Elizabeth, 73, 100
Wohlpart, James A., 123, 147
Wolosky, Shira, 87, 100, 102, 103, 127, 147