Perhaps the greatest difference between the Christian tradition and poststructuralism is that the latter questions the former by declaring that there is no ultimate meaning, transcendental signified, or God—the very foundation upon which Christian belief is structured. David Thomson in “Deconstruction and Meaning in Medieval Mysticism” writes that such disparity has polarized “the university community into proponents of a ‘logo-diffuse’ onto-epistemology and proponents of a ‘logocentric’ one” (107). According to Thomson, poststructuralism’s skepticism concerning language has often shifted into skepticism concerning meaning. That is, while it is possible to make claims about language itself, making claims about meaning or the signified is impossible because, for the poststructuralist, such certainty does not exist—context is all there is. Thomson’s insight is that one aspect of the Christian tradition, medieval mysticism, understood well the fact that human language fails to signify the divine. My purpose in this essay is not to argue against Thomson’s claims. Quite the contrary, using Thomson’s claims as a starting point, I intend to show that Christianity and poststructural semiotic theory can complement each other and that juxtaposing them can help to illuminate the manner in which language works in our world.

Thomson’s essay provides a strong argument for reading the mystics through a deconstructive lens. What he does not do—and what I do not intend to do here—is to deconstruct these texts. I will not use deconstruction as a methodology. Rather, I employ it here as a viable description of the equivocally complex manner in which language works. It is not the only viable description of language, but, like structuralism, it holds a belief in the fact that signifiers produce meaning only in context with other signifiers—and thus that meaning is unstable and negotiable. Poststructuralist critical theory, as I will show, does not provide an apt understanding of the use of language concerning the Christian afterlife, but no theory can adequately
describe such an unknown. St. Paul makes this quite clear in his first epistle to the Corinthians: "But, as it is written: That eye hath not seen, nor ear heard: neither hath it entered into the heart of man, what things God hath prepared for them that love him" (2:9). These issues of ineffability and uncertainty are central to what Christian contemplative thinkers have struggled with over the centuries.

That is precisely the issue that I will explore here. The mystics, as Thom­son demonstrates, held a strong belief in the limitations of language, a belief that aligns them with several aspects of poststructural thought. As a representative of late medieval English mysticism, Walter Hilton, in a popular devotional guidebook from the fourteenth century called The Scale of Perfection, writes about the contemplative search for "Jhesu" in a way that parallels what Jacques Derrida in Of Grammatology and Jacques Lacan in "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious" centuries later would say about language—namely, that the signified is endlessly deferred. English medieval mysticism, however, is not the only branch of Christianity to have foreshadowed poststructural thought. Indeed, St. Augustine of Hippo, a fourth-century convert known for his Confessions and The City of God, frequently struggled with semiotic issues. In On Christian Doctrine, as I will illustrate below, Augustine propounds a definition of God that corresponds to what Lacan defines as the Real, an ineffable presence that Slavoj Žižek in The Sublime Object of Ideology defines as both "the fullness of the inert presence" and "a hole, a gap, an opening in the middle of the symbolic order—it is the lack around which the symbolic order is structured" (170). Lacan's emphasis on the symbolic order, of which language is an integral part, aligns his theories with the deconstructive semiotics of Derrida, and these are the poststructural theories I hope to compare to excerpts from Hilton's and Augustine's texts.

These similarities carve out a common space for the Christian tradition and poststructural semiotic theory: both "theories" struggle with the same limitations in language, even though they end up at different conclusions. However, because both make claims about what might exist outside of language, it requires a significant measure of faith to believe in either. In addition, I would like to consider the linguistic nature of Jesus as the "Word of God" and speculate on what that might suggest for language, for poststructuralism, and for Christianity itself. I thus hope to engage in a conversation that illustrates how poststructuralism and Christianity can coexist, and how such coexistence can illuminate the manner in which language works in our world. My first section discusses Derrida's deferral of the signified in conjunction with certain passages from Hilton's Scale of Perfection; my second section analyzes Augustine's unspeakable "God" from On Christian Doctrine in conjunction with Lacan and Žižek's definition of the Real; finally, my con-
including section will speculate on what these similarities might mean for language, for poststructural theory, and for Christianity.

I

Derrida famously problematizes modern linguistics by claiming that meaning is absent from the signifier and that signification is all there is:

There has never been anything but writing; there have [sic] never been anything but supplements, substitutive significations which could only come forth in a chain of differential references, the “real” supervening, and being added only while taking on meaning from a trace and from an invocation of the supplement, etc. And thus to infinity, for we have read, in the text, that the absolute present, Nature, that which words like “real mother” name, have [sic] always already escaped, have [sic] never existed; that what opens meaning and language is writing as the disappearance of natural presence. (159)

Meaning is not “natural” to language because it has “always already escaped.” This repeated process of the disappearance of presence in language is part of another important Derridean idea, that of différence, a neologism that conjoins the French words for “difference” and “deferment.” The above passage alludes to it with the mention of “infinity.” Diffrance posits the discreteness of language but, more importantly, the idea that meaning is continually deferred or postponed, a distinctly temporal consideration. Language is signification, and signification for Derrida exists in an endless chain of “supplementarity” or infinite substitution. Meaning, or the signified, is always postponed in relation to the signifier.

Similarly, Lacan in “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious” writes that “no signification can be sustained except by reference to another signification” (141). Language, in Lacanian terms, can only anticipate its meaning, which “is content to make us wait for it.” As with Derrida’s différence, language faces an uphill battle in conveying meaning. We can only clarify what we mean by the addition of signifiers, and even then we cannot escape the fact that essential meaning—if indeed it exists—is always just beyond the reach of language. Lacan refers to this contextual mode of signification as a “signifying chain” and likens it to a series of “links by which a necklace firmly hooks onto a link of another necklace made of links” (145). Terry Eagleton calls this a “circular” process in which “signifiers keep transforming into signifieds and vice versa,” resulting in the inability to “arrive at a final signified which is not a signifier in itself” (111). Lacan writes that we adhere to “the illusion that the signifier serves the function of representing the signified, or better, that the signifier has to justify its existence in terms of any signification whatsoever” (142). A signifier, as part of the structure of language, can
only insist on its meaning; it does not consist of the meaning at all. “Were we to try to grasp the constitution of the object in language,” claims Lacan, “we could but note that this constitution is found only at the level of concept—which is very different from any nominative” (141-42). And the concept is not the thing itself.

Hilton’s The Scale of Perfection, a devotional guide for a neophyte contemplative, reveals an understanding of something like the detachment of the signifier from the signified:

I mean not this word Jhesu painted on the wall, or written with letters on the book, or formed by lips in sound of the mouth, nor feigned in thine heart by travail of thy mind; for on this manner-wise, may a man out of charity find Him. But I mean Jhesu Christ, that blessed Person, God and man, son of Virgin Marie, whom this name betokeneth. (111-12)

Hilton understands that an isolated signifier—a collection of letters, sounds, or other syntagmatic structures—does not mean on its own. The signified is absent. “Jhesu” serves to remind the reader of the historical person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God and of Mary, and what he did. It is possible to see deconstructive play at work here: because of the limitations and ambiguities of language, “Jhesu” does not adequately convey the nature of Christ, forcing Hilton to clarify and insist upon what he means. Eagleton calls this process of signification circular because even Hilton’s “But I mean” leads to nothing more than a second string of signifiers streaming into Derridean infinity. Nevertheless, Hilton’s intention is to show that “Jhesu” the signifier is pregnant with the past acts of Christ. Signification here involves memory and reminiscence, which in turn require previous awareness in the mind of the reader to supplement Hilton’s short clarification of “Jhesu.” And it is quite possible that a reader’s personal experience with Christ was far greater than Hilton’s short clarification. Indeed, Hilton’s brevity indicates he expected that.

However, Hilton’s treatment of “Jhesu,” in addition to looking to the past and dividing signifier from signified, looks also to the future. The use of the term “betokeneth” in this passage suggests that the full meaning of “Jhesu” is deferred. The Oxford English Dictionary reveals that “betoken” in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries often implied augury or prefiguration, noting that it meant “to give promise of” as much as it meant “to symbolize.” One could propose, given such proleptic shadings, that Hilton’s “betokeneth” looks to the future as much as to the present. He implies future fulfillment of a deferred signified because complete attainment of “Jhesu” for the contemplative subject is not yet accomplished and will not be accomplished until the hereafter. “Jhesu” thus denotes a promise given to the contemplative, that
of future attainment of the signified. This linguistic deferment parallels what the contemplatives understood spiritually—namely, that their desire for intimacy with God would not be completely fulfilled until they attained "eternal bliss." Like the prisoner who views only the shadowy obfuscation of the Ideal on Plato's cave wall, the contemplative on earth knows God "darkly," whereas in heaven one shall see him face to face. Alastair Minnis makes a similar claim in remarking that language represented for Hilton "an adequate sign-system in respect of this world, but hopelessly inadequate in respect of the world to come" (364). Such a bifurcated view of language does not imply, however, that it signifies unequivocally in this world. Quite the contrary, spiritual fulfillment within temporal existence, like the signified in language, is slippery, evasive, and incomplete:

And though it be so that thou feel Him in devotion or in knowing, or in any other gift what that it be, rest not therein as though thou haddest fully found Jhesu; but forget that thou hast found, and aye be desiring after Jhesu more and more for to find Him. For wit thou well, what that thou feelest of Him, be it never so mickle, yeal though thou wert ravished into the third heaven with Paul, yet hast thou not found Jhesu as He is in His joy. (Hilton 113)

The contemplative-in-training is advised to keep striving after Jhesu through a repeated process of knowing, forgetting, and searching again. The signified keeps slipping away: "Something promises itself as it escapes, gives itself as it moves away, and strictly speaking it cannot even be called presence" (Derrida 154). When one thinks that he or she has achieved Christ, the contemplative subject must then desire more to achieve Christ. Jhesu, like meaning in language, is endlessly deferred. Even the highest form of contemplation, "which is perfect as it may be here" on earth, leads only to partial and momentary unity with God. Complete fulfillment waits on "the bliss of heaven" (Hilton 14). Julian of Norwich expresses this same idea in Showings: "So I saw him and sought him, and I had him and lacked him; and this is and should be our ordinary undertaking in this life, as I see it" (193).

In this framework "Jhesu" can only be clarified by supplementarity, and the connotations of "betoken" suggest that meaning—or the fulfillment of meaning—exists in the future. The very object of contemplation is incessantly out of reach for the subject. Temporality represents endless longing for the signified, but "betoken" for the contemplative also implies a promise. Poststructural semiotics, however, posits no hope for future fulfillment: signification looms before us as an endless chain of signifiers sometimes mistaken for signifieds—of social, political, and moral constructs that dissemble and reassemble themselves as often as another signer is uttered,
written, or thought. At the same time, for the poststructuralist, this fluid polyvalence of signifiers suggests the beauty of infinite possibility in language, an idea to which I shall return later in this essay.

For the moment, however, I will consider a different question. If Christ does represent a deferred signified, what does it mean that the promise of future linguistic fulfillment exists? Of what will that fulfillment consist? Peter S. Hawkins, writing on Dante and ineffability, proposes that language anticipates “the translation of [...] words into the Word” (9):

All [our] words can do is reach after what they themselves cannot touch. And yet [...] this acknowledgement of the limits of language can at the same time serve to point beyond them. For if we cannot now either hear or speak the Word in His ineffability, we can at least look forward [...] to the apocalyptic transformation of our speech; look forward, that is, to the moment and twinkling of an eye, when the divine Word “enraptures” and “absorbs” and “hides away” our mortal language in the resurrection of the flesh. (12)

Implied in Hawkins’ statement is the notion of future fulfillment, but he also recognizes the present “limits” of language. Further, the distinctly eschatological tone with which he discusses language indicates a parallel between both spiritual and linguistic fulfillment. Most importantly, however, Hawkins explains the fulfillment of language not in the sense of its attaining the ability to convey perfectly any signified but in the sense that human language, like the human soul, will be transmuted into union with the divine Word. In other words, language can be united with God because Jesus Christ as the Word of God is both fully God and fully human, both signified and signifier.

Such a rapture demands belief in a linguistic possibility separate from what humanity understands, and such a notion flies in the face of Derrida’s claim that “There is nothing outside of the text” (158). By this Derrida means that what we know and what we speak of exists only in context. Any attempt to gain access to a position “outside of the text” leads simply to further supplementarity. In the case of God, our attempt to define His being as a transcendental signified is delimited by the signifying process itself. This is precisely what Thomson warned against—that too often the poststructural skepticism about language is translated into skepticism about the very possibility of meaning. If writing is all there is, as Derrida argues, how can any notion of meaning be viable? Although I am not prepared to attempt a full analysis of such a question, I intend to show a possibility for understanding language and writing as representing what we know while still maintaining belief in a transcendental signified. To address this issue, I now turn to one of the most esteemed Christian writers and philosophers.
St. Augustine of Hippo, influential to the mystics both theologically and linguistically, believed that earthly language could not convey the heavenly. As Anne Howland Schotter points out, however, Augustine also believed that “if man could not use language to express God he could nevertheless use it to praise Him” (24). She extracts this idea from Augustine’s *On Christian Doctrine*:

> How do I know this, except from the fact that God is unspeakable? But what I have said, if it had been unspeakable, could not have been spoken. And so God is not even to be called “unspeakable,” because to say even this is to speak of Him. Thus there arises a curious contradiction of words, because if the unspeakable is what cannot be spoken of, it is not unspeakable if it can be called unspeakable. And this opposition of words is rather to be avoided by silence than to be explained away by speech. And yet God, although nothing worthy of His greatness can be said of Him, has condescended to accept the worship of men’s mouths, and has desired us through the medium of our own words to rejoice in His praise. For on this principle it is that He is called *Deus* (God). (1.6)

Several inferences can be drawn from this passage. The first is that, for Augustine, God is ineffable. The second is that inherent even in the previous statement is the division between signifier and signified. “God” is not ineffable; rather, the signified or essence of God is. Human language cannot convey the meaning of God but produces the signifier “God” or “Deus” to point to the signified reality, working in the same fashion as Hilton’s “Jhesu.” The meaning of God escapes signification.

What is also important about Augustine’s thought is the idea that human language can praise God even if it cannot express Him and that, in such linguistic conundrums as are produced when something is called “unspeakable,” silence is the best option. There is a dichotomous suggestion here to leave the ineffable quite alone or, on the other hand, to praise it. The choices inevitably waver between abandonment and indirectness, neither seeming quite sufficient. Augustine would argue, however, that God—like Lacan’s Real—is inescapable. The choice, then, is already made: praise God through human language because, first, He welcomes it and, second, because it is impossible for the human subject to abandon God.

Lacan’s Real, like Augustine’s God, is ineffable. Indeed, Lacan even acknowledges that God belongs to the Real. Any discussion of the Real inevitably becomes a question of first things, or of the first cause, because the Real can only be examined through its effects. It is the undeniable metaphysic from which all structural repercussions are produced. The Real, in Derridean
terms, represents the epitome of the present absence, because the “absolute presence” has not only “already escaped” but also has “never existed” (159). By definition it eludes signification yet has made its indelible mark upon signification because it is the void or “lack” around which the symbolic order (which is “writing” for Derrida, the “disappearance of natural presence”) is built. As iek writes in The Sublime Object of Ideology, “The Real is an entity which must be constructed afterwards so that we can account for the distortions of the symbolic structure” (162). The symbolic order can only visit the Real by attending to its effects, the displacements and repetitions that invariably impact the structure.

Augustine’s God and Lacan’s Real demand two different kinds of indirectness. God can only be praised because human language cannot signify Him; the Real can only be examined in its aftereffects because it in itself is a void. To articulate the Real would require one to “produce an utterance of pure metalanguage,” which for iek is absurd because it is impossible (156). The Real remains unarticulated, unspoken, yet ever-present, and Augustine’s God must either be praised or remain unarticulated. Further, Augustine’s God does not consist of absence in the same way that Lacan’s Real does. The Real is a principle and unnamed cause, whereas Augustine’s God is an active, creative, and purposeful Being devotedly interested in and intimately connected with the happenings of His creation. Nonetheless, God is understood in the same manner as the Real—through effect. “No one has ever seen God,” claims the Gospel of John, “but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known” (1:18). In other words, the absent God is present through His Son, Jesus Christ (the “One and Only”), who entered the symbolic order by taking on human flesh in order to redeem humanity. Cause is present in effect. Scripture proclaims this elsewhere: “The heavens declare the glory of God,” wrote the Psalmist; “the skies proclaim the work of his hands” (19:1). Paul’s Epistle to the Romans lays claim to natural revelation as evidence of God’s existence: “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made” (1:19-20; my emphasis). When Christ makes his triumphal entry into Jerusalem before his crucifixion, the crowd of disciples gathered there praises God for the miracles Christ performed. The Pharisees tell Christ to rebuke them, but his response suggests that praise is a necessary effect of God’s existence: “I tell you,” he replied, ‘if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out’” (Luke 19:40).

Because the Real and God are both ineffable, any speaking of them exists indirectly—solely through interpretation:

But even the most true and most present apprehension of God is only an interpretation, so even the very presence of God, God Himself, must be re-
nounced. It is not simply that words about God fall short of the glory of God and ought to be jettisoned to attain real presence, but that even real presence, what Christians might call “very God,” is itself merely another notion about God. God does not exist, for people, save as interpretation. (Thomson 109)

God is not only ineffable but also unthinkable, and the same can be said for the Real. Any attempt to encapsulate “very God” or the Real finds its subject “always already” escaped. It is impossible for language to catch up with the meanings of God and the Real; indeed, even Hilton’s clarification of “Jhesu” can only be defined by the accretion of signifiers. However, this is not to say that language is meaningless or that, just because they are ineffable, God and the Real and Jhesu do not exist. Rather, what Thomson suggests, like the poststructuralists, is that meaning exists in the “interpretive periphery” of context (110). The poststructuralists are right: all that we can know about anything exists in relation to other signifiers.

Although such a claim does not and cannot answer the question as to whether or not God—or, for that matter, the Real—exists, it does carve out a common space for both Lacan and Augustine. Lacan, in conceiving of the Real, attempted to define a principle that cannot be understood, that refuses simple definition, but that affects every aspect of the structural order built upon it. Even the word “Real” is not equivalent to what it attempts to suggest. Augustine’s conception of God is little different. Even though “Deus” is the Latin word for “God”—and Augustine would have considered Latin a higher language than English—neither word contains or is able to convey the completeness of God’s essence. Implied here is a radical division between signifier and signified. Conceivably, Lacan and Augustine were talking about the same thing in two different ways. And although Lacan did not desire to praise the Real as Augustine did God, the notion that such ineffable “entities” can only be spoken of indirectly holds true for both. The paradox of the Real and of God is that neither can be proven to exist or not exist, but the effects of both are found across the texture of the symbolic order.

As I mentioned at the outset, *i*ek paradoxically defines the Real as both “the fullness of the inert presence” and “a hole, a gap, an opening in the middle of the symbolic order—it is the lack around which the symbolic order is structured.” Between the human subject and the localization of metalanguage (which is “Real”) exists an “irreparable gap” (156). The contemplatives viewed spirituality in much the same way, strongly evident, again, in Julian’s acknowledgment that she simultaneously possessed and lacked Christ. Such division is the plight of temporality: the Real represents the fullness of presence that cannot be attained in temporality. Present signification (“We see as in a mirror,darkly”) is incomplete and conveys meaning but does so in a way that suggests its lack, forcing Hilton to reiterate what
he means by "Jhesu." The contemplatives desired to reach God, to reach the metaphysic upon which is built the whole symbolic order. The question remains: can this be achieved?

The answer inevitably lies in the Incarnation, because, like the signifier in language, Christ acts as a readable expression of the ineffable divine. Jesus renders expressible to humanity the concept of God, a concept or signified that is beyond human understanding. Schotter proposes that Augustine's view of human language is analogous to the Incarnation, "for if language had fallen with Adam," she writes, "it had been redeemed by Christ's condescending to take on human flesh—and, therefore, human speech" (24). This is not to suggest, of course, that the Incarnation somehow delivered human language from its ambiguities and limitations. What this does imply, however, is that the incarnate Christ, in addition to representing the transcendental signified and the end of spiritual fulfillment, now also represents the link between human language and what arguably could be referred to as the Real—the meaning that cannot be expressed by human signifiers. Both fully God and fully man, Christ is "fluent" in both the ineffable Real and the human symbolic order. More importantly, as Hilton suggests, in "Jhesu" is "all that thou hast lost" (111). Christ as the conjoined human signifier and divine signified represents translation and the compensation for all spiritual and linguistic lack.

This notion of Christ-as-translation appears in The N-Town Plays, a mid-fifteenth-century Corpus Christi Cycle play also known as Ludus Coventriae (see Kolve). In "The Visit to Elizabeth" scene of N-Town, a fascinating exchange takes place between Mary, who has just conceived Jesus, and Elizabeth, who is six-months pregnant with John the Baptist. Mary sings two lines of the Magnificat in Latin, and Elizabeth follows with the Middle English translation, a pattern that continues for eleven segments. On one level this exchange suggests sympathy for the play's intended audience: to translate from Latin to Middle English rendered Mary's song understandable to the medieval English audience who most likely did not speak Latin. On another level, however, this exchange is emblematic of Christ's act of translation: just as Elizabeth had to translate Mary's song into English in order for the audience to comprehend its meaning, so did God have to translate His ineffable nature into the humanity of Jesus, the Word of God, so that the Godhead might be rendered understandable. To borrow a Lacanian phrase, Christ bridges the "irreparable gap" that exists between the human subject and the ineffable divine.

Augustine understood that the Fall, prefigured by the Old Testament occurrence at Babel, split the signifier from the signified and divided temporality from eternity. Because of humankind's pride, argues Augustine, linguistic signification devolved and, as such, reflects temporality itself. In
Mervelous Signals: Poetics and Sign Theory in the Middle Ages, Eugene Vance points out that, according to Augustine, humanity "labors [... ] in a poem of history that he cannot read as a whole" (47). The fact that language acts as a "perfect reflection of the temporal" suggests, perhaps, that language makes up the temporal. Such an idea is not far from Derrida's claim that existence is writing: there is nothing outside of textuality. Augustine concedes that all we can know exists within the human symbolic order, while still holding a belief in the God that exists both outside of language and outside of time. According to Vance, "Augustine denounces [...] the whole attempt to speak in time about eternity in a language which is itself a perfect reflection of the temporal" (43). Despite believing in something outside of the symbolic order, Augustine recognizes, like Derrida, that human understanding exists in context. Like Lacan, however, he also acknowledges an indefinable presence that affects every aspect of the symbolic order. It is the incarnate Christ, the Word of God, that offers humanity a means to comprehend the ineffable.

In one respect this study suggests that little has changed in the centuries separating medieval Christianity and the era of poststructuralism; humanity still struggles with the same ambiguities and limitations in language. It is possible that perhaps both epistemologies attempt to define the same issue in different terminology, but the greater significance of this discussion lies in the fact that it brings into dialogue two theories that received wisdom posits as antithetical. Poststructuralism dismisses Christian teleology on the basis that it is too totalizing and not applicable to the seeming relativity of existence. Christianity, in turn, dismisses poststructuralism because it negates Christianity's claim to absolute truth. Neither of these reasons can be casually dismissed. What is significant, however, is the degree to which Hilton and Augustine understood concepts we assume to be distinctly poststructural and used such ideas in order to explore both language and spirituality. The point is that modern Christianity cannot simply disavow poststructuralism as anti-Christian.

Similarly, poststructuralism cannot easily dismiss Christian teleology. What this argument boils down to is an issue that Christianity makes explicit while poststructuralism does not: faith. There is no empirical answer to the question of God's existence. So also is there no empirical answer to whether or not the Real exists or whether Derrida's notion of différance is correct. It is true that language, more often than not, is unable to communicate unequivocally what we feel, think, or know. Yet, however imperfect it is, language does communicate, and that is perhaps because every text exists in
context or in structure. Regardless, each of the above assertions must be taken on faith: Lacan had to believe in his Real just as much as Augustine had to believe in God. Such an outlook seems foreign to the contemporary mindset, but to believe in poststructuralism requires as much faith as it does to believe in the Christian God.

The argument comes down to an oversimplified dichotomy: either the Real exists or God exists. Such is not necessarily the case. Both Lacan and Augustine clearly state that the Real and God are ineffable. That is, whatever limitations the signifiers “Real” and “God” create immediately cause each to become not what they attempt to define. One could take this to indicate that there is nothing except signifier beneath these ideas, but one could also suggest that there is some common meaning upon which these ideas are based. It is quite possible that something exists of which we cannot speak and that both the Real and God are vastly incomplete answers to a question that, for now, cannot be resolved fully. This is true regardless of whether or not Lacan or Augustine is right or wrong. Both may be correct but only to the degree that language allows.

What if God does exist, however, and what if language, as Hawkins suggests, is teleologically directed toward some form of rapturous fulfillment? Will such fulfillment erase the beauty and possibility latent within our multivalent language? American modernist poet Wallace Stevens suggests this idea in “Sunday Morning,” which decries teleological desire and argues instead that “Death is the mother of beauty” (68). Change is essential to aesthetic creation and reception; it is to be found, for Stevens, not in a static, perfect heaven but in the variable human emotions that characterize quotidian existence:

Passions of rain, or moods in falling snow;
Grievings in loneliness, or unsubdued
Elations when the forest blooms; gusty
Emotions on wet roads on autumn nights;
All pleasures and all pains, remembering
The bough of summer and the winter branch. (67)

Stevens goes on to indicate that one ought to seek the divinity that exists within oneself, a human divinity that embraces change and death, both of which are essential for the poet’s view of beauty. To put one’s faith in “the holy hush of ancient sacrifice” or “that old catastrophe” of Christianity is to embrace a changeless aesthetic and deny the variable beauty immanent to humanity. Similarly, one might argue that hope for a teleological, linguistic fulfillment is hope for a static, beauty-less heaven that excludes poetry and play in language. Such a desire might spell the end of possibility in language,
the very quality of human discourse that deconstructionists embrace with fervor.

By the same token, though, a post-Resurrection language may represent not static impossibility but infinite possibility. For example, Paul R. Rovang writes that the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, who sought a level of contemplation *beyond* the realm of human intellect and signification, arguably desired "some angelic or pre-lapsarian tongue that would have communicated not mere spiritual concepts, but *experience* itself" (137; my emphasis). Although I do not intend to deviate into a full discussion of this medieval text, Rovang's assertion suggests what a post-Resurrection language might entail, and that is the communication not of concepts but of experience itself. It is impossible to indicate what such a "language" might look like, but its ineffability is consistent with the biblical paradigm I mentioned earlier—namely, that "eye hath not seen, nor ear heard: neither hath it entered into the heart of man, what things God hath prepared for them that love him." At the very least, the fulfillment of language might involve not rigid impossibility but, through perhaps conveying actual experience, ultimate possibility.

Although such a discussion is highly speculative, it refigures the connection between Christianity and language. On the level of signification, Jesus, as I have tried to show, is the expressible signifier of the ineffable divine signified. As I have also noted, the Christian's hope for spiritual fulfillment might also be a hope for linguistic fulfillment. To this end I earlier quoted Hawkins, who observes that the resurrection of the body and soul might also entail the resurrection of our "words into the Word." This is speculation on a future that, for now, remains unknown, but what bearing does this representation of Jesus as the Word of God have on Christianity and language in this life? I suggest that the linguistic nature of Jesus as the Word of God illuminates a central tenet of Christianity—the directive to promulgate faith in Christ.

Reflecting the biblical command to be "doers of the word and not hearers only" (Jas. 1:22), Christianity seeks, as it were, to increase or proliferate the meaning of God. This undertaking begins on a microcosmic level and expands to the macrocosmic. Peter admonishes his readers to "sanctify the Lord Christ in [their] hearts, being ready always to satisfy every one that asketh you a reason of that hope which is in you" (1 Pet. 3:15). This individual responsibility leads to a collective dissemination, as is evident in the Great Commission Jesus delivers to his disciples before his ascension: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost" (Matt. 28:19). In these examples, and indeed throughout Scripture, Jesus the Word is the message that one ought to recommunicate. The paradigm is simple: hear the word and be-
lieve in it; then retransmit that word to others.

Such a progression, I would propose, parallels both the Lacanian and Derridean models of language. Lacan's signifying chain is a series of links interlocked with others—and those links, according to Derrida, are the supplementary signifiers that accrue in our attempt to clarify and define meaning. This composite model posits a vast and endless web-like network of signifiers. Thomson calls this context the "interpretive periphery" from which meaning in language arises. In terms of Christianity, this is also the model for the manner in which the meaning of God disseminates through human signification. God the signified, as Augustine shows, cannot exist within the realm of human discourse; therefore, what meaning of God does exist must emerge via context. Instead of this context's arising from linguistic signifiers, however, it arises from very literal signifiers: people. In other words, each new Christian—each new "word"—helps further to define who God is. The context began with Jesus Christ's coming to earth in order to provide humanity with salvation and then widens through other Christians. This can be compared to Hilton's clarification of Jesus: the accretion of signifiers creates the context for the meaning Hilton intends for "Jhesu." Ultimate meaning is still deferred, and will be until "eternal bliss," but something of God can be known through His people. Similarly, God the signified can be known through the lives of Christians, and that meaning is clarified, defined, and redefined through the continual accretion of signifiers.

My hope is that this discussion reopens the question that poststructuralism asks of Christianity and that Christianity asks of poststructuralism. What the poststructuralist demands of the Christian is the allowance for play, ambiguity, and limitation in signification, as well as the possibility that meaning is endless signification. The Christian tradition, as represented by Hilton and Augustine, answers with an understanding of language and spirituality that is consistent with certain aspects of poststructuralism. Indeed, it is possible that Christianity, with its strong connection to language itself, works in a manner similar to the way in which poststructural theory argues that language works. What the Christian then demands of the poststructuralist is that the possibility for fulfillment, both spiritual and linguistic, indeed exists. Derrida claims that "There is nothing outside of the text": there is no not-text, if you will. It is possible, then, that the ability to decipher such a text (or to hope for translation) comes in linguistic form: Jesus Christ as the Word of God. Poststructuralism may be on to something, but that is not to say that Christianity is not. It requires a significant measure of faith to believe in either.
NOTES

1 All references to Scripture will be to the 1899 Douay Rheims version.

2 Any treatment of Hilton must concede that it is nearly impossible to pin down exactly what he said. Many of the forty-five manuscripts of The Scale of Perfection contain what editor Evelyn Underhill calls “Christo-centric” additions. Some of these emendations can be traced to the author himself; others have a more questionable provenance, created perhaps by scribes copying the text who wanted to make it more Christian. Although this is an important debate, I do not propose to engage it fully. It is necessary here, however, to note that Underhill’s text represents a collation of ten manuscripts and that she notes instances where something seems to have been added. According to her, this particular passage appears in several of the more reputable manuscripts. When I refer to “Hilton,” I thus am referring to the text that Underhill has given us. For fuller treatments of the issue of Christocentric emendations, see Underhill’s introduction, Knowles’ chapter on Hilton in The English Mystical Tradition, and Clark and Dorward’s introduction to The Scale of Perfection.

3 Cf. Derrida’s point that “one cannot attain” the Real and “one also cannot escape it” (156).

4 It must be made clear that what Lacan and Augustine speak of—and what I inevitably also speak of—is not what it is. What I can only hope to do here is to discuss the ideas that both thinkers constructed in order to talk about the Real or God. I address this idea more fully in my conclusion.

WORKS CITED


