CHAPTER SIX

THE TRANSFORMATION OF SEMIOSIS

In the previous chapter we established two frameworks for the reading of *De doctrina*: Williams's mapping onto one another of *signum/res* and *uti/frui* distinctions, and Deely's articulation of the triadic sign relation as that which transcends the divide between nature and culture. Moreover, we found that the scope of the sign according to the latter framework was presupposed to the mapping of the former framework, and indeed to *De doctrina* more widely. The hypothesis to be established by Chapter 5— that creatures (and therefore human beings) are signs of God—was therefore yielded, ultimately, by both frameworks together. The *signum/res—uti/frui* mapping was what first allowed it to be posited (creatures are to be used for the enjoyment of God, thus creatures are to be treated as signs of God), but the scope of the triadic sign relation is what justifies the extension of signs from, say, words all the way to God’s living creatures.

The purpose of the present chapter will be to interrogate the hypothesis that creatures are signs of God in the light of the oddity that the ‘thing signified’ in this case is not a creature but God. In all of the examples we gave to explicate Deely’s semiotics, showing how signs are operative (variously) from nature through to culture, the object signified was invariably a creature. Further, the implication of both Williams’s mapping and Deely’s semiotics was that any creature is potentially a sign. On the one hand, all creatures can become signs of God, and on the other hand, the whole range of creaturely phenomena (from nature to culture) can be caught up in semiosis, since a creature’s functioning as a sign depends not on the kind of creature it is but on the kind of relation it is caught up in. Thus, in all creaturely cases, the thing signified can in turn become a sign of a further thing.

But, as we have also seen on Augustine’s account, God as supreme thing, by contrast with creatures, cannot become a sign: while all else is *signum* in respect of God, there is nothing in respect of which God can become *signum*; no thing beyond himself to which God can be referred as sign. Thus when God is the thing signified, the rule that the thing signified can in turn become a sign is broken. The effect of putting God into the sign relation, it would seem, is to disrupt the normal functioning of the
creaturely sign. In short, God is not a thing like other things (or other things signified). We drew attention in the last chapter to Augustine’s expression of this insight:

*Res igitur, quibus fruendum est, pater et filius et spiritus sanctus eademque trinitas, una quaedam summa res communisque omnibus fruentibus ea, si tamen res et non rerum omnium causa, si tamen et causa.*

The things therefore that are to be enjoyed are the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, in fact the Trinity, one supreme thing, and one which is shared in common by all who enjoy it; *if, that is to say, it is a thing, and not the cause of all things; if indeed it is a cause.*

It is the task of the present chapter to investigate how he follows through on the ramifications of this insight. To anticipate, we will argue that Augustine’s application of the *signum/res* distinction to the relation between God and creatures does not so much serve to categorise creatures and God as signs and thing respectively, but serves—more subtly—to point up the difference between God and creation—or, in other words, *to articulate the divine difference.* This difference can be captured in the following aphorism: ‘By contrast with creatures, God is a thing that cannot become a sign.’ In other words, God is set apart from creatures, each of which has the potential to become in turn the sign of something else, by the fact that God cannot be caught up in the sign-activity which potentially pervades the whole of creation.

In his insight that God is not a thing like other things, Augustine is in fact doing nothing other than reminding us that the hypothesis of the previous chapter—the claim that creatures signify God—must itself be put through the mill of apophasis. In other words, the word ‘signify’ fails in respect of God no less than any referential or descriptive word fails. It places God no less within creaturely language, for instance, than to say that God is ‘cause’ of creation. And if God is not a cause like other causes, as Augustine reminds us, then God is certainly not a signified like other signifieds. Thus, if the claim (that creatures signify God) is to have any import, it must be subject to apophatic interpretation—i.e. it must do something else than describe or name the relationship between God and creation. It is just such an interpretation that the present chapter will offer. To anticipate, it will be argued that the claim that creatures signify God points to the manifestation of the divine difference within creaturely semiosis, and more specifically, to the transformation that creaturely

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1. *doctr. chr.* 1.5.5 (CCSL 32.9), emphasis added.