ABSTRACT. Medical semiotics in the 18th century was more than a premodern form of diagnosis. Its structure allowed for the combination of empirically proven rules of instruction with the theoretical knowledge of the new sciences, employing the relation between the sign and the signified.

KEY WORDS: medical semiotics, practice, signs, symptoms, theory, 18th century

In 1826, Christoph Wilhelm Hufeland wrote a small, six-page essay in which he summarized his avowal of “the value and the importance of medical semiotics” as follows: First, semiotics is a dictionary, providing the grammar we need to interpret the language of nature.1 Second, it represents the linguistic doctrine of the medical art in that it fixes the use and meaning of medical terms. Third, semiotics is “the reverse of pathology,” for “it may be that the physician is well versed in pathology and is able to explain theoretically every disease, but all that is of no help at the bedside, because he does not recognize the disease. Only medical semiotics teaches us [to recognize diseases].”2

This statement about medical semiotics is interesting for two reasons. The first has to do with the time period and the person. Hufeland, one of the most famous medical practitioners of his time, emphasized the importance of semiotics just as the subject of medical signs was beginning to be dropped from the academic canon. A defense of semiotics, similar to Hufeland’s would not have been necessary in the 18th century. However, after the turn of century, as the diagnostic recognition of specific diseases began to dominate medical thinking and medical practice,3 this change highlighted a self-evident and hence unspoken truth among physicians.

The second reason is that Hufeland described here in precise terms the two elements of medical semiotics that did, indeed, give it importance and value in the 18th century, namely that it was the dictionary and grammar of nature’s language, as well as the foundation of medical practice. Thus, medical semiotics of the 18th century was both a theory of signs and of practice.
For my arguments I will discuss these two elements from two different perspectives, dealing with each in a separate section. The first perspective, following Michel Foucault, is that of the semiotic model.\(^4\) It refers to the level of theory or the general order of signs. In other words, the semiotic model describes the epistemological structure of knowledge or the ground on which medical semiotics flourished in the 18th century. The second perspective is that of medical semiotics in a narrower sense,\(^5\) that is, those intermediate doctrines that are taught canonically between the theoretical sciences and therapeutic instruction. The “value and importance” of medical semiotics in this sense will be exemplified using Boerhaave’s pathology.

In order to avoid misconceptions it is necessary to clarify certain main terms. Dealing with *semiotics, signum* and *signatum* has nothing to do with modern “semiotics”, developed by linguistic philosophy since Ferdinand de Saussure. In the 18th century a sign or *signum* was the phenomenon which “brings out the hidden fact or the secret evidence,”\(^6\) presenting in this way the *signatum*. The relationship between the signifying phenomenon (*signum*) to the signified invisible (*signatum*) determined 18th century semiotics. I therefore do not differentiate between signs and symptoms in this paper. For even the *symptoma* or the “accident” [Zufall] is, as a phenomenon in the broadest (epistemic) sense, a visible sign.\(^7\)

1. THE THEORY OF SIGNS

“The ill nature speaks to us through signs (all phenomena of illness perceptible to the senses). The phenomena are simply many words. The whole is the language of nature, and semiotics is the dictionary and the grammar of this language.”\(^8\)

These comparisons were not just metaphors. On the contrary, the equivalency of phenomenon and word, signs and language, grammar and science, constituted knowledge in the 18th century. The semiotic relation between distinctive mark and signifying name, *signatum* and knowledge, comprised the foundation of philosophical theories and histories of nature.\(^9\) The perceptible appearance of a natural object was a *signum*, because its denotation was the *signatum* representing the scientific order and knowledge of this object.

This is not the place to discuss in detail the epistemological background of semiotics in the 18th century. A brief outline of the main positions which gave fundamental “value and importance” to semiotics shall suffice. Comparing nature with a book, the idea of natural alphabet, which could be deciphered and read, was still present at this time. Natural history