Felix Holt’s *Muddled Metaphors*

A friend of ours, long a victim to dyspepsia, was earnestly recommended to try a ‘digestive powder’ which promised to restore any amount of lost ‘vigour.’ The recommendation came from one who had great confidence in the powder, because he knew that *the advertiser made a very good living out of it.*

G. H. Lewes 1862
‘Physicians and Quacks’

Readers usually consider *Felix Holt* one of George Eliot’s less successful novels, not so bad as *Romola*, but not nearly so good as *Adam Bede, The Mill on the Floss, Silas Marner,* or *Middlemarch.* Its elitism, sentimentality, nostalgia, inconsistency, and excessive idealization of the main character usually take the blame for the inferiority. Elsewhere, I have argued that its confusing politics, a mixture of the Wollstonecraftianism of Mrs Transome’s plot and the Burkean gradualism of Felix’s, help account for the failure. But the conflict between expressed and implied attitudes toward metaphor, as indicated in various aspects of the intoxicant complex, also creates disturbing disjunctions. More obviously than the fiction, the companion ‘Address to Working Men by Felix Holt’ also loses effectiveness because its persona offers only metaphorical solutions to social problems. Felix the essayist falls into a practice he objects to as the youthful protagonist of the fictional work.

Partly because public houses serve as campaign headquarters, during the election that forms the main action, major disturbances and disruptions occur at the many drinking-place settings throughout this novel. After various minor conflicts result from treating, electioneering, and rabble rousing at the Sugar Loaf, the
Marquis of Granby, the Ram, and the Seven Stars, the climactic riot gains its chaotic force both from events that occur at the inns and ale houses and from the mob’s interest in attacking the breweries which account for much of Treby Magna’s prosperity. Similarly, legitimate heritage and the printed word both suffer from dangerous manipulations on the night on which Mr Christian buys enough drink for Tommy Trounsem so that he can substitute his own campaign poster handbills, which allude to the open secret of Harold’s illegitimacy, for the ones Tommy has engaged to post.

Such interactions among the print and oratory of the election, the people who manage it, and the places where the activities of the campaign go forth guarantee the prominence of the drug metaphors and metonymies in this, the novel in which George Eliot takes her most overtly political stance. In both Felix Holt and in the ‘Address to Working Men by Felix Holt’ she offers her clearly stated remedies for the Condition of England.

The Pharmakon

In addition to being more pervasive than in her previous novels, drugs and drinking are more Platonic in Felix Holt. Like many of her contemporaries, as the nineteenth century wore on, George Eliot moved away from an Aristotelian/mimetic aesthetic to find certain elements of Platonism more acceptable. By the sixties and seventies, new translations attracted attention to the single important Greek philosopher ignored in mid-century because Victorians considered his idealism too remote from the concerns of quotidian reality to benefit society. Frank Turner includes Benajmin Jowett, a close friend of the Leweses whose scholarship George Eliot read and commented on favorably, among the most prominent revivalists.

With Felix Holt, George Eliot’s participation in the late Victorian Platonic revival begins to take distinct shape in her fiction. Whereas in her earlier works she divides representation of the realism/romanticism opposition between alcohol and opium, now her metaphor more closely resembles the Platonic Pharmakon