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Colour Revolution, Vitalism and the Ambivalence of Modern Arcadia

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At the end of the first decade of the 20th century, Magnus Enckell, whose works were formerly known for their sparse content and reduced colour, began to make paintings using a free brush technique and a bright palette. This new direction is represented by *Boys on the Beach*, a landscape he painted in Suursaari in 1910, which glows in shades of pink, purple, blue and yellow. The sea is calm, but the curve of the shoreline, the tense position of the boy in the foreground and the strong brushstrokes infuse the work with a rhythm and a sense of movement. The sparkling light of the sun is reflected through the tops of the trees, from the stones on the shore and the boys' bare skin. The work can be said to be vitalist in terms of both its subject matter and its execution.

The vitalist movement, which advocated a natural, healthy and liberated lifestyle, emerged at the turn of the 20th century in opposition to the decadence of modern life and its destructive impact on physical and spiritual wellbeing. Although the development of technology and science, and the industrialisation and urbanisation that went hand in hand with that, ushered in greater prosperity, it was felt that modern life had at the same time alienated people from nature. The prevailing mechanistic world view and profit-based culture created a deep division between the body and spirit, and between people and their natural environment. Vitalism manifested in the content and ideas of the art world through, for instance, depictions of outdoor life, sunlight, water and the naked – especially the male – human body. Vitalist-themed works often employed a style and composition that emphasised an impression of dynamism and also expressed the deeper philosophical foundation of vitalism.¹

In the Nordic countries, for example, works by Edvard Munch from Norway, J. F. Willumsen from Denmark and Eugène Jansson from Sweden featured vitalist outdoor themes, naked men or children, and the dynamic interplay of colour and light. Enckell's *Boys on the Beach* is reminiscent of Willumsen's work from the same year, *Sun and Youth* (1910, Gothenburg Art Museum), which shows children romping at the beach. These paintings by Enckell and Willumsen are linked not only by their beach-life theme, but also by their vibrant colour world and a Neo-Impressionist technique. The works both depict bathing boys and feature key vitalist elements such as nudity, the sun and water. Images of childhood

¹ Sven Halse. 'Wide-Ranging Vitalism: On the Concept and Phenomenon of Vitalism in Philosophy and Art', in Gertrud Hvidberg-Hansen and Gertrud Oelsner (eds.), *The Spirit of Vitalism: Health, Beauty and Strength in Danish Art, 1890–1940*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum, 2011, (47–57) 52.

and adolescence are essential vitalist motifs in themselves, as children were thought to be closer to nature: their natural bodies expressed a wholesome life force in an ideal way. The light of the sun served as a symbol of vital energy at a time when research within the natural sciences explored its healing effect and scientists advocated light and air baths to treat and combat many diseases, especially tuberculosis.² The human body bathed in the light of the sun is thus at once a spiritual and physical symbol that reflects vitalism in both a practical and a philosophical sense.

The direction that Enckell's art took in the early 20th century has scarcely been addressed in a vitalist context, and vitalism has generally not received the attention it deserves in Finnish art-historical literature.³ In Enckell's case, the focus has been on his colour revolution, which has been understood to have been inspired by the influence of new French art. Enckell was a key figure in organising an exhibition of Finnish art at the Paris Autumn Salon in 1908, and the initial negative critiques that reached Finland were naturally a bitter disappointment when expectations had been so high. Although there were also positive reviews in the French press, the overall consensus was that Finnish art lagged behind the latest French trends. Enckell began to strive for a colourful Neo-Impressionist expression, and became a pioneer of this new direction in Finland.⁴

A circle of artists called the Septem Group gathered around Enckell, and exhibitions of their colour paintings brought an awareness to a larger audience, but new types of outdoor and corporeal themes which linked these artists with vitalism also emerged in tandem with their bright palette and free brush technique. Vitalist associations are clear in the work of one of Septem's key artists, Yrjö Ollila (1887–1932), for example, and the athletic naked male body portrayed in his painting *The Shot-Putter* (1911) refers to ancient sculptures and the modern sports culture in a way that was typical of vitalist art.⁵ Enckell also made sketches on the shot-putting theme in the early 20th century, and his drawings and sketches, as well as the finished paintings, all feature an abundance of naked men. The naked male body in his work is often shrouded in themes and mythologies from ancient times. In these works, vitalism seems to be intertwined in an intriguing way with its conceptual counterpart, decadence. It is this ambivalence that makes the concept of vitalism a particularly fruitful perspective from which to examine Enckell's art.

The vitalist philosophy of life

Vitalism not only described a healthy lifestyle – when applied to art and philosophy, it also assumed deeper meanings. In the philosophical sense, at the heart of vitalism is the notion of some kind of ultimate, all-pervading life force that a scientific, mechanistic world view could not explain. Philosophical vitalism is not to be equated with physical vitalism, which emphasises bodily culture, but both share a common history and overlap. The idea of a life force in vitalism that unites spirit and matter was not new: the concept had already been mooted in both poetry and philosophy during the Romantic period and, later in the 19th century, the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche saw life as an uncontrolled stream of animal pursuits and desires. In *The Birth of Tragedy (Die Geburt der Tragödie, 1872)*, Nietzsche

2 Patricia G. Berman. 'Mens sana in corpore sano: Munch's vitale kropp', in Karen E. Lerheim (ed.), *Livskraft: vitalismen som kunstnerisk impuls 1900–1930*. Oslo: Munch-Museet, 2006, 45–60; Halse, 'Wide-Ranging Vitalism', 52–57; Gertrud Oelsner. 'Healthy Nature', in Gertrud Hvidberg-Hansen and Gertrud Oelsner (eds.), *The Spirit of Vitalism: Health, Beauty and Strength in Danish Art, 1890–1940*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum, 2011, (159–197) 183–87; Gunnar Sørensen. 'Vitalismens år', in Karen E. Lerheim (ed.), *Livskraft: vitalismen som kunstnerisk impuls 1900–1930*. Oslo: Munch-Museet, 2006, (13–41) 13–14.

3 See Riitta Ojanperä. 'Vitality', in Timo Huusko (ed.), *Surface and Depth. Early Modernism in Finland 1890–1920*. Helsinki: Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum, 2001, 94–112.

4 Jaakko Puokka. *Magnus Enckell: Ihminen ja taiteilija*. Helsinki: Suomalainen tiedeakatemia & Otava, 1949, 152–56.

5 Ojanperä, 'Vitality', 98–99.



Magnus Enckell, Two Men, undated, watercolour and pencil on paper, 39.7cm x 32.7cm

Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Jenni Nurminen



called this uncontrollable quality of life 'Dionysian', and set it in opposition to 'Apollonian' harmony, which he said was alien to human life as we know it. In the culture of vitalism, the Dionysian libido is intertwined with an idealism adopted from the ancient world. At the same time, the Nietzschean *Übermensch* provided a model for modern masculinity that exuded health, power, and beauty.⁶

The fashionable Symbolist style of art that Enckell followed in Paris in his youth sought connections between matter and spirit, or the visible and invisible world, and emphasised intuition over rational reason as a means of gaining knowledge. According to this way of thinking, which was popular at the time, different kinds of invisible energies, vibrations and currents gained currency in scientific, artistic and esoteric fields. The French philosopher Henri Bergson, who later became known as vitalism's central thinker, had already gained cult status within Symbolist art circles at the end of the 19th century.⁷ Bergson's

international breakthrough came with his book *Creative Evolution*, which was published in 1907, and this turned him into a leading figure within an ideology that was critical of materialism, rationality, and positivist science. If his name was not known before then in Finland, it certainly was from that time on and his works were widely read, especially among Swedish-speaking cultural circles.⁸

According to Bergson, the life force, or '*élan vital*', signifies the constant process of growth and change in which we, as living beings, are involved.⁹ Bergson considered art to be part of this vital order which, unlike a geometric order based on reason and spatiality, was intrinsically intuitive, creative, and individual.¹⁰ According to this perception, art was completely alive, process-based and constantly re-creating itself. For Bergson, both art and philosophy relied on intuition, and this made it possible to detach oneself from the pragmatic, goal-oriented structures produced by reason. The artist's task was to translate the rhythms

6 Gertrud Hvidberg-Hansen and Gertrud Oelsner. 'The Triumph of Life', in Gertrud Hvidberg-Hansen and Gertrud Oelsner (eds.), *The Spirit of Vitalism: Health, Beauty and Strength in Danish Art, 1890–1940*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum, 2011, (10–45) 19; Halse, 'Wide-Ranging Vitalism', 49–51.

7 Robert C. Grogin. *The Bergsonian Controversy in France, 1900–1914*. Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1988, 42–43; Suzanne Guerlac. *Thinking in Time: An Introduction to Henri Bergson*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006, 11.

8 Stefan Nygård. *Henri Bergson i Finland: Reception, rekontextualisering, politisering*. Helsingfors: Svenska Litteratursällskapet i Finland, 2011.

9 Guerlac, *Thinking in Time*, 7.

10 See Ruth Lorand. 'Bergson's Concept of Art', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 39, no. 4, October 1999, 400–15; J. Mullarkey and C. de Mille (eds.). *Bergson and the Art of Immanence: Painting, Photography, Film*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013.

and harmonies that are the subject of intuitive consciousness into visual forms that reflect the inner life of their subject. Intuition allowed the artist to merge with their subject, creating a special mutual tension between them, and thus between the viewer and the work.¹¹

Enczell's work during the 1910s placed the independent dynamics of colour and form in a more central role. Despite this clear stylistic transformation, however, it is possible to conceive of a continuum extending from the Symbolist art of the late 19th century towards a new, colourful expression. It is noteworthy that Enczell had already been quoted in the 1890s as saying that, in his view, there were no colours in nature at all, so the reduced palette he used in his early, ascetic works was also the result of a conscious aesthetic-philosophical reflection. Symbolist art reflected the broader scientific debate at the time about optics and the importance of visual perception. The key question was how the subjective experience could be rendered in visual form. At the same time, Enczell was interested in the esoteric trends that characterised the art of the period, and he became convinced of the common mission of art and religion to reveal the truth that lay beyond the visible world.¹² The idea of colour as an independent aesthetic element, as well as its interwoven connection with philosophical questions regarding the nature of the universe, thus runs like a thread through Enczell's different phases and styles.

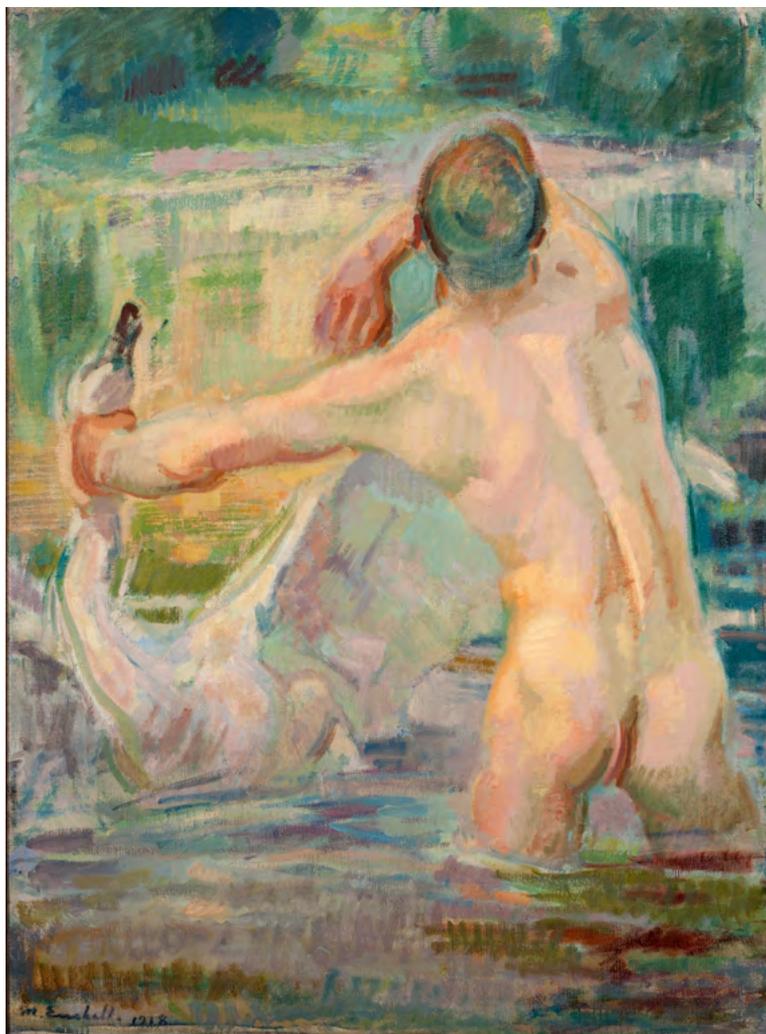
Even without knowing how deeply Enczell had become acquainted with Bergson's philosophy, it is still possible to locate the intersections between Enczell's art and vitalist aesthetics based on Bergsonian thinking. Many of the artists of the time embraced Bergson's ideas and creatively applied them in their art. For example, Henri Matisse, the central figure in colourist French modernism, found in Bergson a philosophical basis for his aesthetic innovations.¹³ Matisse's images of modern Arcadia, which sparkle with rhythms of light and colour, were the initial impetus for a trend called Fauvism. The group of artists nicknamed *les fauves* (the wild beasts) caused a scandal in Paris in 1905 with their brightly coloured expressive art, and a couple of years later, when Enczell brought the exhibition of Finnish art to Paris, he felt that the minimalist, ascetic art that still prevailed in his home country had been mercilessly left behind by these latest trends.

With regard to Enczell's art, there are two essential connections to Bergsonian thinking which provide a philosophical basis for his change of palette and style. Bergson's thoughts are connected to a broader vitalist context, and through this context Enczell's subject matter gains new significance. This is one aspect of Enczell's vitalism, and the other is more closely related to philosophical issues, aesthetic theory and artistic practice, manifested in bright colours and disintegrating form. According to Bergson, colour is not a property of an object, but rather acts as a perceptible mediator between matter and our own consciousness.¹⁴ As Enczell's art becomes more colourful, it also breaks loose from the portrayal of solid form and three-dimensional geometric spatiality.

Naked men of antiquity

In terms of the subject, the depiction of the naked male body and ancient mythologies run as a continuum from Enczell's early production to his colour painting in the 1910s. However, the fantasy subjects favoured by Symbolism, along with their associated androgynous characters, change in his later work to become images of vitalist male bodies, and the content borrowed from antiquity is barely even recognisable. Vitalist art looked to ancient times for a way of representing the human body as the well-proportioned, athletic male body that had also been central to that era. Mythological figures and vitalist features in ancient art were combined

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- 11 Mark Antliff, 'The Rhythms of Duration: Bergson and the Art of Matisse', in John Mullarkey (ed.), *The New Bergson*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999, 196–97.
 12 Salme Sarajas-Korte. *Suomen varhaisymbolismi ja sen lähteet*. Helsinki: Kustannusosakeyhtiö Otava, 1966, 67, 157–62.
 13 Antliff, 'The Rhythms of Duration', 185–86.
 14 Antliff, 'The Rhythms of Duration', 188, 197.



Magnus Enckell,
Man and Swan, 1918, oil on
 canvas, 108cm x 80cm
 Gösta Serlachius Fine
 Arts Foundation, Mänttä
 Photo: Vesa Aaltonen

to portray the modern athletic body in a way that emphasised the sensuality of nudity. This glorification of corporeality was connected to the idea of the revitalising power of a natural way of life that would benefit both the individual and society.¹⁵

Outdoor life and the cult of health gave nudity new, different meanings. Sporting and beach-life themes made nudity more commonplace and made it visible in a way that had not been experienced since ancient times. The Western fine art tradition had predominantly favoured the female nude as an aesthetic ideal that had manifested various symbolic meanings. The vitalist body, on the other hand, belonged primarily to men. Questions of corporeality, sensuality, and sexuality that were inevitably associated with the representation of the naked body thus had to be viewed from a new perspective. Vibrant, athletic masculinity served as a symbol of healthy humanity and a strong nation. However, the trial of the writer Oscar Wilde, for example, brought an increased awareness of homosexuality in the late 19th century, and this cast depictions of the naked male body in a suspicious light, and even branded them as pornographic.¹⁶ Homosexual associations in portrayals of nudity that referred to antiquity, which were abundant not only in art but also in other visual cultures, began to become increasingly apparent.

Enckell's works, which combined ancient myths with the male naked body, thus fit into a vitalist framework in an interesting and

ambivalent way. References to antiquity make the homoerotic body safer to look at, but associations with homosexuality do not disappear; they merely change form. The influence of ancient myths is indicated, for example, in the painting *Man and Swan* (1918), at least if it is interpreted as a variation of the classical myth of Leda and the Swan. Such a mythical reference marks the work as fundamentally sexual.¹⁷ This violent, erotic tale, which sees the Greek god Zeus transform himself into a swan to seduce the young maiden Leda, has been popular with artists through the ages and has been depicted countless times. However, Enckell's version deviates significantly from the traditional myth by replacing Leda with an athletic young man who is standing up to his thighs in water. The swan's wings are spread and the man is gripping the bird's neck tightly in a remarkably phallic gesture. The light falling on the foreground of the image strikes the man's back, emphasising the contours of his taut muscles.

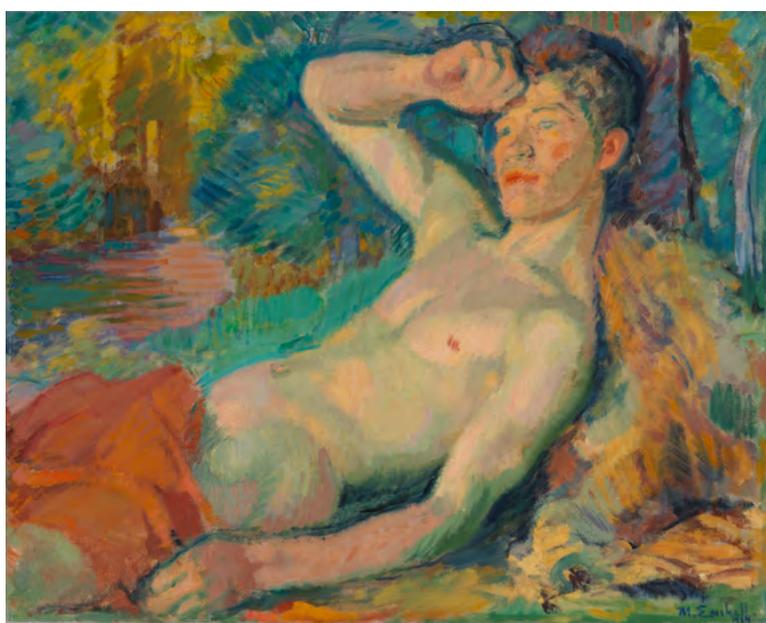
Man and Swan has been interpreted as representing the artist's struggle with his subject, but it could equally be viewed as a depiction of the vitalist struggle for existence.

15 Hvidberg-Hansen and Oelsner, 'The Triumph of Life', 11–15.

16 Lill-Ann Körber. 'Sexuality, Aesthetics and the Vital Male Body', in Gertrud Hvidberg-Hansen and Gertrud Oelsner (eds.), *The Spirit of Vitalism: Health, Beauty and Strength in Danish Art, 1890–1940*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum, 2011, (218–30) 219.

17 Juha-Heikki Tihinen. *Halun häilyvät rajat: Magnus Enckellin teosten maskuliinisuuksien ja feminiinisyysien representaatioista ja itsen luomisesta*. Taidehistoriallisia tutkimuksia 37. Helsinki: Taidehistorian seura, 2008, 42.

The combination of beauty and strength, spirituality and carnality, embodies a sense of being alive that also carries a powerful erotic charge. Pondering the mythological swan, it could be seen as a symbol of virile 'masculine sexuality', yet defining a work as homoerotic remains largely in the eye of the beholder. When Enckell exhibited the work for the first time, one critic admired the 'masculine freshness' of the colours and the 'bold masculine *joie de vivre*' that is expressed in the work. On the other hand, Sigurd Frosterus, a theorist who was known as an advocate of colour painting, sensed a spiritual disconnect in the struggle between the man and the swan. At the same time, however, he also recognised an impression of vitalist movement in the form and colour language of the work, in which geometric spatiality expands into a modern dynamic space.¹⁸



Magnus Enckell, Awakening Faun, 1914, oil on canvas, 65.5cm x 81cm
 Hoving Collection, Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Jenni Nurminen



The ambivalence of modern Arcadia

While it is easy to connect Enckell's works with vitalism and its associated cult of masculinity, they also contain clear contradictions. For example, the statuesque athletic male nude bodies of Munch's *Bathing Men* (1907–08) can evoke homoerotic connotations in the contemporary viewer, but this kind of association would hardly have arisen at that time, or at least not in the same way, although the undisguised nudity of men might have been perceived as shocking. The men portrayed by Munch were however free to represent a healthy outdoor life and masculinity.¹⁹ Enckell's works, on the other hand, were subject to suspicion from the start. It is hard to say how much their reception was informed by an awareness of Enckell's sexual orientation, but many contemporary critics

thought that the rich colour scheme that Enckell favoured and his broad brush technique lacked a certain poise and contained something suspiciously feminine.²⁰ Perhaps this is why the connections between Enckell's colour-era works and vitalism has not been immediately clear, but vitalism and homosexuality are not mutually exclusive, and Enckell was by no means the only artist from that period whose works are perceived to combine the masculine cult of the body with homoeroticism. Eugène Jansson's spa themes are an obvious example of how a vitalist context could provide space for homoerotically charged imagery. In these works, muscular men are objects not only for the viewer, but also for the figures within the narrative of the painting.²¹

Homosexual associations reference illness, crime, and degeneration alongside health and vitality. The concept of decadence often served as a euphemism for homosexuality.²²

18 Harri Kalha. *Tapaus Magnus Enckell*. Historiallisia tutkimuksia 227. Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2005, 87, 158–60.

19 See Berman, 'Mens sana in corpore sano: Munch's vitale kropper'; Lill-Ann Körber. 'Sunnhet versus homoerotikk? Badende menn, nakenhet og den mannlige akt rundt 1905', in Ingebjørg Ydstie (ed.), *Livskraft. Vitalismen som kunstnerisk impuls 1900–1930*. Oslo: Labyrinth Press, 2006, (79–93) 80–83.

20 Kalha, *Tapaus Magnus Enckell*, 74–79

21 Körber, 'Sexuality, Aesthetics and the Vital Male Body', 220–22.

22 Per Esben Svelstad. 'Homosexuality as Decadence in Norwegian Modernism: The Tenebrous Sides of Vitality in Åsmund Sveen's *Andletet*', in Guri Ellen Barstad and Karen Patrick Knutsen (eds.), *States of Decadence: On the Aesthetics of Beauty, Decline and Transgression across Time and Space*, vol 1. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016, (45–60) 46.

Vitalist ideas arose from an opposition to decadence, but it is difficult to separate these seemingly oppositional phenomena completely. They are like the two different sides of a coin. Vitalism was accompanied by a nostalgic idea of an erstwhile Golden Age paradise that had been inherited from the Romantic period, when humans lived in harmony with their surrounding nature. At the same time, there was an optimistic dream of a utopian future, where health, happiness and harmony would flourish again. Decadence also includes a utopian idea of a future in which decay is not inevitable, but rather leads people once again to find a path to a healthy and natural existence. Decay is therefore accompanied by the promise of a new beginning.²³

In literature and the visual arts, decadent turn-of-the-century symbolism served as a fertile breeding ground for a vitalist sense of life. It was the melancholy introversion, sensitive hyper-aesthetics and the general mood of decay inherent in the experience of decadence that set vitalism in motion.²⁴ In contrast to vitalist integrity, decadence meant disintegration and the dangerous dissolution of boundaries. On the other hand, as we have seen above, philosophical and artistic vitalism was also associated with the disappearance of boundaries with regard to the fusion of spirit and matter and the collapse of solid forms into rhythmic vibrations. Vitalism can thus be seen as an attempt to avoid an accusation of decadence, also at the level of style and aesthetics. Through a vitalist philosophy, breaking down form and using colour that was labelled feminine was connected to a healthy sense of life, rather than decay.

Awakening Faun (1914) is a work in which almost the only reference to antiquity is the title. While the naked male body follows classical proportions, its languid sensuality hints at decadence. The use of intense colours and broad brushstrokes creates an energetic tension, which can be interpreted as a reference to the life-giving power of nature. The almost abstract setting may be paradisiacal, but it is not static. The figure, who could just as well be a contemporary young man as the mythical creature indicated by the title, reminds us that the paradisiacal state is also possible here and now. The Golden Age of antiquity – a favourite subject for the Symbolists and one that Enckell too had explored in his work – received a host of new interpretations through the lens of vitalism, which blurred the boundary between the lost paradise of the past and a happy, vitalist utopia of the future.

Enckell's *Boys on the Beach*, which was mentioned at the beginning of this article, is in many ways a pure-blooded vitalist work that contains almost no ambivalence. The paradise it embodies is entirely immanent. The associations created through mythological references to the ancient world and the Golden Age also make works like *Awakening Faun* a kind of representation of modern Arcadia. But Eve has now left this paradise for good.

23 Henrik Wivel. 'Decadent Barbarism', in Gertrud Hvidberg-Hansen and Gertrud Oelsner (eds.), *The Spirit of Vitalism: Health, Beauty and Strength in Danish Art, 1890–1940*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum, 2011, 134–57; Körber, 'Sexuality, Aesthetics and the Vital Male Body', 218–30.

24 Wivel, 'Decadent Barbarism', 135–37.