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**The Ontology of The Band**

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# CHAPTER 7. The Ontology of The Band

According to a famous saying attributed to French artist Jean Cocteau, cinema is death at work. Some documentaries literally record death at work. Wim Wenders' *Lightning Over Water*, for instance, records the final stages of director Nicholas Ray's life while Werner Herzog's *Grizzly Man* includes recordings of the final stages of environmentalist Timothy Treadwell's life. Martin Scorsese's 1978 documentary the *Last Waltz* also records the last stages of a life. Yet, that is not the life of a person, but rather of a social object, a band, namely, The Band.

This chapter will start from Scorsese's documentary to investigate the ontological nature of The Band. In previous work (Terrone 2017), I have developed an ontology of bands starting from imaginary borderline cases that were inspired from the venerable puzzle of the Ship of Theseus. Here, I would like to adopt a different methodology. I will focus on a paradigmatic real band, The Band, with the aim of building up an ontology of bands that effectively deal with basic cases like this and fit with the way they are treated in 'our reflective critical and appreciative practice', according to what David Davies (2004, 18) calls 'the "pragmatic constraint" on the ontology of art' (see also the 'Goldilocks Constraint' in Ritchie 2020, 403). The key methodological assumption is that we do not need to be too much concerned about borderline cases in social ontology. Indeed, the difficulty to accommodate those cases might even be a merit of an ontological theory inasmuch as that helps us to explain why those cases are *borderline*.

## 7.1. The Band's Lifespan

'The Band has been together sixteen years, together on the road' says Robbie Robertson when interviewed by Martin Scorsese. Since the interview was done in 1976, when the Band was about to break up, one might guess that the lifespan of that social object was 16 years. According to this view, the Band should have been born around 1960.

However, the band was baptized ‘The Band’ only in 1968, when their first album, *Music from Big Pink*, was released (see Helm 2015, 174). Why is Robertson suggesting that The Band existed long before its baptism? Arguably, because the band’s members were working together since the end of the 50s. The series of events that led to the birth of The Band originates in 1958, when rockabilly singer Ronnie Hawkins, also known as ‘The Hawk’, moved from Arkansas to Canada with his band the Hawks. There, the Hawks’ drummer Levon Helm met the Canadian guitarist Robbie Robertson, and they became friends. In 1960, Robertson successfully auditioned for a job with Ronnie Hawkins and the Hawks. That might be the period that Robertson has in mind when he says to Scorsese that ‘The Band has been together sixteen years’.

Still, from an ontological perspective, it is not evident that The Band was brought into existence in 1960. Ronnie Hawkins formed the Hawks in 1957, and one might argue that the band Robertson joined in 1960 was a late stage of the Hawks rather than an early stage of The Band. So, when did the Hawks turn into The Band?

The first future member of The Band who joined the Hawks was Levon Helm. He became the Hawks’ full-time drummer in 1958. Before 1958, the Hawks is clearly distinct from The Band since there is no overlapping of members, while since 1968 The Band is clearly distinct from the Hawks as indicated by the new name. The problematic period is 1958–1967, in which there is overlapping between members of the Hawks and members of The Band. With the aim of shedding light on the ontology of The Band in that period, I shall introduce hylomorphism as an ontological framework that can enable us to effectively deal with social objects like bands.

## 7.2. The Band’s Form and Matter

The hylomorphic ontology rests upon Aristotle’s thesis that things are constituted by both their form and their matter. For example, a statue may have clay as its matter and the shape of the subject portrayed as its form. Simon Evnine (2016) has revisited Aristotelian hylomorphism, arguing that the notion of form can be unified with those of origin and function, while the notion of matter can subsume not only stuff such as clay or marble, but also more complex components which the form configures (see Evnine 2016, 9). For example, the matter of a bicycle might consist of wheels, frame, tires and so forth while its form is the way in which those components are organized

by a certain process of making (the origin), for a certain purpose (the function). Artifacts, from this perspective, are 'the impress of mind on matter' (Evnine 2016, 100).

While Evnine mainly focuses on technical artifacts, Asya Passinsky (2021) applies hylomorphism to social objects, arguing that in that case the form is a norm that governs the use of the matter. Hence, social objects owe their existence to both material constitution and constitutive norms. For instance, the form of a border is the norm that establishes whether one is or is not entitled to cross the strip of land that is the border's matter. Likewise, the form of a band is the bunch of commitments that keep together the musicians who are the band's matter (see Petersen 2024). The form, in this sense, is a principle of connection, an ontological glue that unifies the musicians into a band. But what is exactly this glue, out of metaphor?

From Evnine's perspective, the form is related to the origin and to the function. The function of a band is to make its own music, and its origin is the joint intention of the members who aim to play together. From Passinsky's perspective, the form is the norm that prescribes the members of the band to play together. Evnine's and Passinsky's approaches can be combined, I contend, by casting the (Evninian) joint intention of the band's members as the main source of the (Passinskyan) norm whereby the function of making their own music is pursued. In short, the joint intention crystalizes into a norm that prescribes the function.

This view has interesting correspondences with Katherine Ritchie's (2013; 2020) conception of 'organized social groups' as structured wholes that impose relations and requirements on the group's members in virtue of 'factors like social practices, habits, beliefs, intentions, arrangements, and patterns of actions' (2020, 406), so as that the group's members are meant to be 'functionally related, or at least normatively bound' (2020, 411) in the ways prescribed by the structure. As both Ritchie (2020, 410, footnote 19) and Passinsky (2021, 18) acknowledge, such structuralism is a sort of hylomorphism inasmuch as the group's structure corresponds to the form and the group's members correspond to the matter of the hylomorphic complex.

The crucial connection between Ritchie's structuralism and Passinsky's normative hylomorphism is that the structure acquires normative force from the shared attitudes of the members of a community who represent the relevant social object (for instance, a band) through what François Recanati (2012, 205) calls a

'public mental file'. In previous work (Terrone 2017), I argued that social objects like bands are ontologically dependent on public mental files. Thorben Petersen (2024) aptly points out that the mental file theory of bands, albeit on the right track, 'does not say what kind of thing an individual band is'. I agree with him that we need to supplement the mental file theory with some sort of hylomorphism to say what kind of thing an individual band like The Band is. However, the hylomorphic analysis ultimately reveals that the form of a social object, as a norm, relies on a public mental file whereby the norm is both enforced and abided by.

This is the sort of social hylomorphism on which I shall draw to develop an ontological account of The Band. My aim is to capture in philosophical terms the insightful characterization of bands that rock critic Greil Marcus (2015, 63) offers in the chapter on The Band of his book *Mystery Train*:

> A rock 'n' roll group is a banding together of individuals for the purpose of achieving something that none of them can get on their own: money, fame, the right sound, something less easy to put into words. But what begins as a marriage of convenience sometimes takes on its own value. An identity comes into being that transcends individual personalities, but does not obscure them—in fact, it is the group, sometimes only the group, that makes individuals visible. […] Groups are images of community. That The Band had created itself through the years, and had come to our attention bent on demonstrating just what their years together had been worth, was perhaps the most potent image of all.

According to Marcus (2015, 62), The Band is a paradigm band because they do not only illustrate the idea of community, but also turn that idea into the main theme of their songs, which is the American community: 'they were committed to the very idea of America: complicated, dangerous, and alive'.

## 7.3. The Band's Birth

From 1957 to 1959, Levon Helm is just another piece of the matter shaped by the form of the Hawks, whose primary function is to make music in support of Ronnie Hawkins. The fact that their concerts were billed as 'Ronnie Hawkins and the Hawks' is a significant clue in this respect. Borrowing Ritchie's (2020, 405) terminology, we might say that supporting Hawkins was a *structural requirement* for the Hawks.

Since the arrival of Robbie Robertson in 1960, however, there might be room for a joint intention by Helm and Robertson to make music in a way that goes beyond Hawkins' rockabilly. Such possibility is further encouraged when three other Canadian musicians, who will become members of The Band, joined the Hawks just after Robertson: bassist Rick Danko in late 1960, piano man Richard Manuel and organist Garth Hudson in 1961. Robertson, Danko and Manuel were 18 years old at that time, Helm 21, Hudson 24.

At that point, the matter of The Band completely overlaps with the matter of the Hawks. That is a phase of transition in which it is hard to establish whether 'the impress of mind on matter' warrants the persistence of the Hawks or rather favors the inception of The Band. Robertson surely has in mind the latter option when he says to Scorsese 'The Band has been together sixteen years'. Yet, it seems plausible that the transition from the Hawks to The Band occurred only in late 1963, when the group split from Hawkins over personal differences. As Robertson puts it, Hawkins

> built us up to the point where we outgrew his music and had to leave. He shot himself in the foot, really, bless his heart, by sharpening us into such a crackerjack band that we had to go on out into the world, because we knew what his vision was for himself, and we were all younger and more ambitious musically. (quoted in Gill 2020)

From then on, the musical group had a new form (a new constitutive norm) in virtue of which its matter (the members) was meant to make its own music rather than Hawkins's music. The change of name is significant in this respect. In 1963 Helm, Robertson, Danko, Manuel and Hudson replaced the name 'Hawks' with 'Levon Helm Sextet', having as sixth member sax player Jerry Penfound. In 1965, Penfound left the band, which then took the name 'Levon and the Hawks'. As Levon Helm (2015, 106) tells: 'Soon we turned into Levon and the Hawks, which sounded better to me. Sometimes it was the Hawks. We also got booked into places we'd recently played by calling ourselves the Canadian Squires'.

While the first change of name (from Hawks' to 'Levon Helm Sextet') is a clue of an ontological transition, the other changes (from 'Levon Helm Sextet' to 'Levon and the Hawks' and from that to 'the Canadian Squires' and back to 'the Hawks') seem to come down to mere replacement of labels for the same entity, since the latter changes, unlike the former, tend to preserve the combination of intentions, form and

function that organizes the matter of the hylomorphic complex. Such a combination is effectively expressed by Danko in a conversation occurred in 1963, just before the breakup with Hawkins, and reported by Helm (2015, 103):

> Young Rick was insistent. 'Why can't we have a band,' he asked, 'where everybody plays an instrument, everybody sings, everybody does it without some guy out in front of the thing running the show and deciding the way things are gonna go?'.

## 7.4. The Band's Rise

In 1965, Bob Dylan invited the Hawks to tour with him and they played together a series of concerts from September 1965 through May 1966, billed as Bob Dylan and The Band. Moreover, in 1967, the Hawks joined Dylan in Woodstock, New York, to work on the sessions that will be released in 1975 as Dylan's *Basement Tapes*.

All that might tempt us to state that from 1965 to 1967 the Hawks turned into a new band (say, Dylan's Hawks) whose primary function was to make music in support of Bob Dylan just as from 1957 to early 1963 they were a band (say, Hawkins' Hawks) whose primary function was to make music in support of Ronnie Hawkins. The temptation might be encouraged by the fact that Helm left The Band in late 1965 since he was unhappy with their subordination to Dylan as he explains in his autobiography: 'I knocked on Robbie Robertson's door and told him I was pulling out. I said, "You know I've always had the same ambition: *to be our own band*. You had that same ambition too; that was the plan."' (Helm 2015, 140).

Still, supporting Dylan was not crucial to the band in 1965–1967 in the way supporting Hawkins was crucial to them in 1957–1963. Supporting Dylan was just one of the functions they fulfilled in that period, not *the* function. So, the temptation to reduce the 1965–1967 Hawks to Dylan's sidemen should be resisted. Consider Robertson's reply to Helm that the latter reports in his autobiography: 'He said, 'I know that, but Bobby's opening a lot of doors for us, man. We're meeting important people, learning how to travel, making contacts that we'd never make otherwise. Some good's gotta come from this' (Helm 2015, 140). Robertson was right. In parallel with their collaboration with Dylan in Woodstock, Robertson, Danko, Manuel and Hudson started creating the songs to be included in The Band's first album, *Music from Big Pink*. In late 1967, Helm himself acknowledged that after rejoining his

fellows to give his contribution to the album: 'Rick called and said to come to Woodstock. They were all in the room, and I spoke to everyone. I couldn't believe that my band was going to get back together. Everyone sounded a little older and wiser' (Helm 2015, 153).

*Music from Big Pink* was released in 1968 and widely acclaimed. The song "The Weight" gained further popularity in virtue of being included in the soundtrack of the film *Easy Rider*. In 1969, The Band went on tour, performing at the Woodstock Festival and the Isle of Wight Festival. In the same year they released their second album, simply titled *The Band*, which was a critical and commercial triumph and includes what is usually taken to be their best song ever, "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down".

## 7.5. The Band's Fall

In the early 70s, The Band began to show signs of crisis. Their third album, *Stage Fright*, released in 1970, was seen as a letdown from the previous two. More importantly, discomfort and private resentments among members began manifesting themselves. As Helm (2015, 216) puts it, 'It was a dark album, and an accurate reflection of our group's collective psychic weather. "Daniel and the Sacred Harp" was about selling your soul for music. "Stage Fright" was about the terror of performing. "The Shape I'm In" was about desperation. "The Rumor" was about paranoia'.

The main contrast was that between Robertson and Helm. The latter charged the former with authoritarianism and greed and suspected that his old friend was manipulated by manager Albert Grossman:

> I even confronted Robbie over this issue during this era. Can't you see what's happening? I asked. It's the same old divide and conquer syndrome that the management boys *always* pull on musicians. They took Elvis away from his band, Bill, Scotty, DJ.; same thing with Buddy Holly and the Crickets, and Roy Orbison and the Teen Kings. It's the old trick: Isolate the 'star' and fuck the other guys. And it's always the worst thing that can happen to the music. Maybe it simplifies things for the company, but it interferes with our job, which is to make better records every time out. (Helm 2015, 210)

On the other hand, Robertson justified his dominance by appealing to the other members' unreliability, indicating Manuel's, Danko's and Helm's addiction to heroin. Helm (2015, 209) recalls that in his autobiography: 'Robbie Robertson has referred to the *Stage Fright* era as 'The Darkness,' by which he means this period of addiction and dissolution. But I remember that the drugs were just part of the black mood that settled upon us. There were also the issues of artistic control of The Band and the direction we were going in—if any'. In fact, in the memoir *Testimony* (2017) and in its documentary adaptation *Once Were Brothers: Robbie Robertson and the Band* (2019), Robertson tends to trace Helm's artistic concerns back to a paranoid state due to drug abuse, as suggested by this declaration from *Once Were Brothers*:

> Levon often complained about our lawyer, about our manager, and it was a kind of paranoia. I would often say, 'Don't worry, if anybody is taking advantage of us, we are gonna stop that immediately'. But a bitterness set in with him.

The tension between Helm and Robertson that started during the *Stage Fright* era was jeopardizing the existence of The Band. In hylomorphic terms, one might say that the instability of the band's matter was threatening the stability of its form. Despite such mounting problems, however, The Band kept releasing one album per year: *Cahoots* in 1971, the double live album *Rock of Ages* in 1972, and the cover album *Moondog Matinee* in 1973. In that year they moved from Woodstock to Malibu, California, where they renewed their association with Bob Dylan, backing on his album *Planet Waves* and preparing a national tour that was held in 1974 and documented by the live album *Before the Flood* released the same year.

In 1975, the Band released their first album of all-new material since *Cahoots*, *Northern Lights, Southern Cross*, which consists of eight songs written exclusively by Robertson. That was a major comeback, but record sales were quite poor. As Helm (2015, 249) puts it, '*Northern Lights, Southern Cross* was the best record we'd made since *The Band* in 1969, but it got only middling reviews, and Capitol couldn't break the first single, "Ophelia", on the radio'. Indeed, that album revealed itself to be a sort of swansong. In 1976, The Band started coming apart. The social object as an hylomorphic complex was about to break since the normative pull of the form was less and less capable to counterbalance the centrifugal thrusts of the matter. According to Helm (2015, 253), the main centrifugal thrust was Robertson's individualism: 'Sometime in September we got word that Robertson and our management wanted to

put it away. Robbie had had enough, and they decided to kill The Band and go out with a bang'. On the other hand, Robertson ascribes his own impatience to his fellows' puzzling behavior due to drug addiction, especially to Helm's:

> It was beginning to feel like a real fracture. One day I said to Levon, 'I can see what's going on. I know you.' And he was doing the junkie denial and explaining and making excuses and laughing and slapping me on the back, and I'd never had this kind of an encounter with him before. We don't do that. We don't lie to one another. I still loved him, but something got broken in that. And it was like glass, it was hard to put back together again. (from *Once Were Brothers*)

## 7.6. The Band's Death

When Helm (2015, 253) said 'they decided to kill The Band and go out with a bang' he was referring to the 1976 farewell concert, which was held on November 25th, Thanksgiving Day, at the Winterland Ballroom in San Francisco, and filmed by Martin Scorsese who turned it into a documentary, *The Last Waltz,* released in 1978. The concert was initially meant to represent the end of The Band as a group on the road. In fact, in 1977, they released a new album, *Islands*. The same year, they recorded three soundstage performances (one with the Staple Singers, one with Emmylou Harris and one on their own) which Scorsese filmed and included in *The Last Waltz*, combining them with the 1976 concert footage and post-concert interviews in Shangri-La, a former deluxe bordello that since 1974 was The Band's recording studio in Malibu.

However, when Scorsese's documentary was released in April 1978, The Band had just stopped existing not only as a group on the road but as a band as well. They went out of existence after performing together one last time during Rick Danko's concert on March 1st at the Roxy Theatre in West Hollywood. The end of The Band is a long goodbye that extends from the making of *The Last Waltz* in 1976 to its release in 1978. Even though the 1976 farewell concert was just meant to put an end to the group's live exhibitions, the 1978 documentary casts that event as the ultimate end.

From a hylomorphic perspective, we can conclude that, in 1978, the form of The Band was no longer capable of keeping its matter connected. The Band was disbanded. Helm, Robertson, Danko, Manuel and Hudson continued their careers as

musicians but the hylomorphic complex that had unified them into a higher-level social entity from 1963 to 1978 was not existing anymore.

## 7.7. An Elegy for The Band

*The Last Waltz* evocates the crisis of The Band from the very first shot, which depicts a triangle of balls on a pool table. Scorsese asks: 'Okay, Rick, what's the game?' and Danko answers: 'Cutthroat'. Scorsese insists 'What's the object of it?' and Danko, just before hitting his ball, explains: 'The object is to keep your balls on the table and knock everybody else's off'. As argued by Stephen Severn (2002, 27), *The Last Waltz* is a film about Robertson's attempt to elevate himself above the other members of the group and ' "cutthroat" provides its central metaphor'. According to Severn, Scorsese casts Robertson as the billiard player who is going to win the cutthroat game.

Severn (2002, 26) builds his argument by relying on Helm's (2015) detailed and harsh criticism of the documentary in the ninth chapter of his autobiography. The passage in which Helm (2015, 276) describes his reaction to the first screening of *The Last Waltz* is perhaps the most emblematic:

> For two hours we watched as the camera focused almost exclusively on Robbie Robertson, long and loving close-ups of his heavily made-up face and expensive haircut. The film was edited so it looked like Robbie was conducting the band with expansive waves of his guitar neck. The muscles on his neck stood out like cords when he sang so powerfully into his switched-off microphone.

Helm surely has good reasons for criticizing Scorsese's choice of making the Band look like Robertson's sidemen. Robertson's privileged connection with Scorsese emerges especially in the interviews that, in the editing of the documentary, alternate with the performances. In the first interview, for instance, Scorsese discusses only with Robertson. In the second and in the third, Robertson is sided by Danko and Manuel but remains the main speaker while his two fellows look like funny and weird extras. The fourth interview features again Robertson on his own, while in the fifth Manuel reappears at his side. We are almost at the midpoint of the documentary and neither Helm nor Hudson have appeared in the interviews so far.

Still, if we move from the interviews to the way Scorsese films the performances of the songs, we can see that *The Last Waltz* does not limit itself to lingering on Robertson's genius but also celebrates The Band *as a band* by representing its

structure in visual terms. The film expresses not only the matter but also the form of The Band cinematically. Lead guitarist Robertson and bassist Danko play in the foreground with drummer Helm on their left, while in the background we can see organist Hudson and pianist Manuel. Even if we concede that Helm (2015, 276) is right in stating that 'The film was edited so it looked like Robbie was conducting the band', it is evident that there is much more than that in *The Last Waltz*. Consider for instance how Scorsese films the performance of the first great success of the Band, "The Weight", which here is played together with The Staple Singers. The filmmaker clearly gives Helm the leading role. The first shot of this sequence involves a camera movement that leads us from Robertson's guitar solo to Helm singing the first verse of the song while playing drums. This shot communicates, in cinematic terms, that Helm is as crucial to The Band as Robertson. Indeed, they are the two poles on which the structure of the social object is based. From the film's perspective, the other three members look like satellites that orbit around those two planets. The dialectic between Helm and Robertson is represented by Scorsese as both a unifying factor and a possible source of conflict for The Band. From an artistic perspective, Helm's deep roots in Arkansas' peasant culture perfectly complement Robertson's sophisticated intellectual cosmopolitanism, but their worlds are so different that cannot remain jointed forever.

The dialectics between Robertson and Helm appears even more striking in the next song that Scorsese films on stage (after the short interlude of "Old Time Religion" filmed in the Shangri-La studio), viz. The Band's masterpiece "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down". Helm (2015, 263) casts that as 'maybe the best live performance of this song we ever gave'. Although at the beginning the camera lingers on Robertson who acts as if he were conducting the band, Helm is like a magnet who imperiously attracts the camera to himself when he starts singing while playing the drums. Since the first verse of the song until the last execution of the chorus Helm is the absolute focus of cinematic attention. In fact, Scorsese struggles to pay homage to Robertson to whom he reserves the final close-up of the sequence, but Helm's presence is so overwhelming that, from then on, the editing of the documentary cannot help but giving him a central role also in the interviews.

All that indicates that *The Last Waltz,* perhaps despite Scorsese's intentions, is not just a celebration of Robertson's genius but especially a reflection on The Band's

structure and functioning as a social object. Robertson surely emerges as the author of the vast majority of the songs and as an outstanding guitarist: a 'mathematical guitar genius' as Bob Dylan said (quoted in Helm 2015, 145). Yet, *The Last Waltz* also shows that singing was as crucial to the functioning of The Band as composing or 'mathematical' guitar playing, and singing was not Robertson's business. In an interview about The Band included in the documentary *Once Were Brothers*, Bruce Springsteen states that

> Not only did they have the incredible writing, you know, Robbie's writing, but they had three of the greatest white singers in rock history. To have any one of those guys would be the foundation for a great band. To have three of them in one group, that was … just loaded for bear.

The three singers Springsteen is here referring to are Helm, Danko and Manuel. *The Last Waltz* surely emphasizes the importance of Helm's and Danko's singing, while Manuel is given the central place that he deserves in "The Shape I'm In" sequence but, in the "I Shall Be Released" sequence, as Helm (2015, 267–268) complains, 'the damn cameras couldn't even find him during the verses he sang'. Helm (2015, 276–277) takes that as a clue of the failure of the film: '"I was in shock over how bad the movie was. Nine cameras on the floor, and there wasn't even a shot of Richard Manuel singing the finale, "I Shall Be Released"," his trademark song. It turned out that of the nine cameras, only two were used in the movie. No film of Muddy Waters kissing me on the head, right onstage. Nothing showing how Garth Hudson led the band and inspired us all. It was mostly Robertson, showing off and acting like he was the king'. Helm surely is onto something here but, once again, that is not the whole story. *The Last Waltz* portrays not only Robertson's leadership but also The Band's struggle to preserve its original collective spirit which the music journalist Ralph J. Gleason summarizes as follows:

> They were together, like a team, like a family, like a band.... Somehow four Canadians and an Arkansas country boy found it in themselves to express part of where all of us are at now while expressing themselves in language that can ignite explosive trains of thought inside your head. Out of all the idle scheming, they gave us something to feel. (quoted in Helm 2015, 194)

*The Last Waltz* is both a celebration of the strength of this collective, its impressive combination of form and matter, and a recognition of its fatal flaw, which is destined to prevent the form from keeping the matter unified. As J.P. Telotte (1980, 17) puts it, 'the film takes on an almost elegaic tone at points, though it is a tone which may seem

oddly mixed with that sense of "celebration" which The Band avowedly aimed for'. On the one hand, Scorsese portrays the outstanding richness and variety of the musical talents of The Band's members (who all were multi-instrumentalists) and the unique style of their collective creation as well as their capacity to generously put themselves at the service of other musicians, as emblematically illustrated by the performances with their former mentor Ronnie Hawkins at the beginning of the film and with their late mentor Bob Dylan at the end. On the other hand, *The Last Waltz* tells the story of the dissipation and disruption of all that. It celebrates the form of the social object in the very moment when that form fails to govern its matter. As an elegy, it is about greatness and death at the same time.

## 7.8. The Band's Resurrection

In 1983, Helm, Danko, Manuel and Hudson reunited for a concert tour. In 1985, Jim Weider replaced Robertson as the lead guitarist. After remaining five years out of existence, The Band resurrected. Here is a decisive ontological difference between social objects and garden-variety biological organisms. The former, unlike the latter, can resurrect provided that the normative bunch of attitudes, relations and requirements that constituted its form reveals itself to be capable of unifying its matter once again. That is to say that members of a social group can be reconnected so as to resurrect the dead hylomorphic complex in a way the organs of a dead organism cannot.

The resurrected Band even survived the death of one of its members, Richard Manuel, who hanged himself in 1986 just after a concert in Winter Park, Florida. In 1990, Manuel was replaced with Stan Szelest, who quite ironically had been replaced by Manuel himself in 1960 as the pianist of the Hawks. When Szelest died of a heart attack in 1991, his position as pianist was filled by Richard Bell, another former member of The Hawks. In the meanwhile, Randy Ciarlante also joined The Band as a drummer.

With this new lineup, The Band kept performing during the 90s and released three albums for small independent labels: *Jericho* in 1993, *High on the Hog* in 1996, and *Jubilation* in 1998. Without Robertson or Manuel as songwriters, *Jericho* and *High on the Hog* rely heavily on cover versions; only a few tracks are original. *Jubilation*, on the other hand, has more originals than covers, which suggests a new

creative vein that was meant to be developed in a planned follow-up album. Yet, that wish remained unfulfilled. In 1999, *The Band* contributed a cover of *One Too Many Mornings* to the tribute album *Tangled Up in Blues: Songs of Bob Dylan* which revealed itself to be the final song they recorded together. When Rick Danko died of heart failure in December 1999, The Band went out of existence for good.

## 7.9. The Band's Metabolism

Although the case of The Band shows that social objects can resurrect while garden-variety organisms such as plants and animals cannot, there is a crucial feature that social objects such as bands share with organisms, namely, ontological metabolism. Evnine (2016, 13) casts ontological metabolism as the capacity of an entity to keep existing in virtue of its form despite changes in its matter. From a hylomorphic perspective, the form as a principle of connection of matter ensures persistence by enabling replacement of pieces of matter provided that the structural constraints are satisfied (see Petersen 2024).

According to Ritchie (2020, 411), the structure of a social group may put constraints on its metabolism. She uses bands as her main example: 'if bands are structured wholes, some band structures might require that specific individuals occupy particular nodes. For instance, the existence of Radiohead might require that Thom Yorke occupy the node of lead singer' (2020, 411, footnote 20). Although the metabolism of Radiohead makes room for changes in secondary members, from Ritchie's perspective it might not allow the change of the band's leader.

The Band, however, is not that sort of leader-dependent social object, as shown by its capacity to survive as a group when Helm left in 1965, and to resurrect in 1983 despite the absence of Robertson. Indeed, Helm's departure in 1965 was rather the occasion for the inception of Robertson's leadership, just as the band reunion in 1983 after Robertson's departure was arguably the occasion for Helm to regain his place as the group's leader.

Still, some structural constraints on social metabolism hold also for The Band. Even if the change of the leader had been allowed, not every change of matter is allowed. Weider, the guitarist who replaced Robertson in 1985, created a group in 2013 with the aim of continuing the musical legacy of The Band. Yet, he did not dare to cast that as a second resurrection of The Band. He named the group 'The Weight

Band' precisely to indicate that this was a new entity, only artistically connected to The Band, not ontologically. Arguably, the personality of the original members of The Band was so crucial to the group that, although it survived the departure of some of them, it could not survive the absence of all of them. The form of The Band as a hylomorphic complex can face some changes of its original matter, but not the change of *all* that matter.

The Band survived the suicide of Manuel in 1986 and, in principle, might have even survived the death of Danko in 1999, had Helm and Hudson decided to keep it, or bring it back, into existence. After Helm's death in 2012, the possibility of a new resurrection of The Band was close to zero but, in principle, Hudson and Robertson might have reunited themselves (as they did, by the way, in 1994 when The Band was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame) with the aim of recreating The Band. That option also became ultimately unavailable when Robertson died some days ago, on August 9, 2023. I was still in the middle of writing this essay then. Hudson, the eldest member of the original lineup of The Band, is the only one still alive now when my essay is finished. He is 86 years old. It is hard to see how he might recreate The Band on his own.

In fact, I do not think that there is any deep metaphysical reason that would prevent Hudson from doing that. I do not even think that there is some deep metaphysical reason that would prevent The Band from resurrecting without any of its original members. The reason why The Band is gone forever rather comes from the normativity of social practices. As I have argued in this chapter, bands are social objects that are constituted by both matter and form, that is, respectively, musicians and norms that keep those musicians together by relying upon the shared attitudes of the participants in the relevant practice, which for bands is the practice of making and appreciating rock music. My philosophical investigation of that practice has led me to conclude that practitioners are no longer disposed to amend or renegotiate the constitutive norm of The Band in order to unify some matter and enable the existence of the hylomorphic complex. The practice of rock music casts The Band as an entity that survived Manuel's death, and might have even survived Danko's, Helm's and Roberston's, but cannot survive the death of them all. For the constitutive norm of The Band prescribes the unification of pieces of matter which will never come back, The Band as a social object will never come back either.

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