

Beyond Philology No. 16/2, 2019
ISSN 1732-1220, eISSN 2451-1498

<https://doi.org/10.26881/bp.2019.2.09>

**Exploring silence – exploring ourselves:
Sara Maitland's *A Book of Silence***

ANETA WADOWSKA

*Received 13.10.2017,
received in revised form 17.01.2019,
accepted 30.05.2019.*

Abstract

What is silence? It is more difficult that it might seem to give an exhaustive definition of it in one sentence. Sara Maitland's *A Book of Silence* is an abundant source of reflection on various kinds of silence. It emerges from the author's own experiences and from those of other writers on whom she draws. Maitland's book, along with some of her literary and scientific sources which she refers to, constitutes the basis for the considerations contained in this article, the aim of which is to draw the reader's attention to the fact that silence is a relative phenomenon and that physical silence, understood as a lack of or muting of audible sounds, can be perceived by an individual either positively or negatively, depending on the circumstances in which the silence is experienced. Additionally, the way in which it is perceived can seriously affect a person's health and well-being and, in extreme cases, it may even decide someone's life.

Keywords

Maitland, silence, subjectivity of perception, solitary confinement

**Odkrywanie ciszy – odkrywanie siebie:
A Book of Silence Sary Maitland**

Abstrakt

Czym jest cisza? Zawarcie wyczerpującej definicji zjawiska, jakim jest cisza w jednym zdaniu jest zapewne trudniejsze, niż nam się wydaje. *A Book of Silence* Sary Maitland to niezwykle obfite źródło wiedzy na temat różnych rodzajów ciszy, którą autorka czerpie z własnych doświadczeń oraz z doświadczeń innych pisarek i pisarzy, których prace przywołuje. Książka Maitland oraz utwory literackie i prace naukowe, do których autorka się odnosi, stanowią podstawę rozważań zawartych w niniejszym artykule, którego celem jest zwrócenie uwagi czytelników na fakt, iż cisza jest pojęciem względnym oraz że cisza, rozumiana jako brak lub wyciszenie słyszalnych dla ludzkiego ucha dźwięków, może być postrzegana przez jednostkę jako coś bardzo pozytywnego lub negatywnego, w zależności od okoliczności, w jakich jednostka się a nią styka. Co więcej, sposób, w jaki jest ona postrzegana może mieć poważny wpływ na zdrowie i dobre samopoczucie jednostki oraz, w ekstremalnych przypadkach, może nawet decydować o czymś życiu.

Słowa kluczowe

Maitland, cisza, subiektywność postrzegania, przymusowe odosobnienie

Sara Maitland is a well-known fiction writer, scholar, and feminist. *A Book of Silence*, published in 2008, is an account of her many personal experiences involving silence which resulted in emotional and spiritual enrichment and helped her to overcome obstacles associated with writing which, as she states, is immensely important to her, as it is “integral to [her] sense of well-being, even of identity [...]” (Maitland 2008, 189). In the course of writing her book, Maitland also became aware that silence, and everything connected with it, can be perceived either positively or negatively, depending on the situation in which silence is experienced. *A Book of Silence* is a val-

uable source of knowledge about different kinds of silence, as well as about works by other authors who have silence at the heart of their respective works. Additionally *A Book of Silence* is an afterword of some of her earlier publications, such as “A Big Enough God: Artful Theology” (1994) which already contain reflections on silence and the role which it plays in the development of an individual. From the issues mentioned above, the main focus of the analysis in this article will be the subjectivity of the perception of silence and its possible implications. The first and the second part of this paper shall concentrate on analysing Maitland’s positive personal encounters with silence. The third part will be devoted to some of her negative experiences and the more extensive research on scientific and literary sources focusing on silence which she mentions. Special attention here will be drawn to cases in which people involuntarily experience silence, as this always leads to significant changes in the way that they perceive both themselves and the outside world. The final part will draw attention to the cultural conditioning which also influences the way silent surroundings are perceived in general.

1. Noisy youth and first positive encounters with silence

Maitland starts telling her story from the end, when she receives the completion certificate for her newly-built house near the village of New Luce in Galloway, in southwestern Scotland. Later, she goes back in time to tell the story of her life and reflects on the role that silence plays in it. As for her childhood, adolescence and the first years of her adulthood, the title of the first chapter (“Growing up in a Noisy World”) speaks for itself. Born in 1950 in London, Maitland grew up in “an enormous early Victorian mansion house” (4) in south-western Scotland together with her five siblings. She recalls those first years as “jolly noisy” and describes her time at boarding school as depressing, with “no silence or privacy being allowed except as a punishment” (6). Skillfully putting everything into a historical context, later she writes about the three years she

spent at Oxford University (1968-71) when the noise that surrounded her became more attractive, as it was the time when she observed the development of such things as the Flower Power Movement or “the brand-new Women’s Liberation Movement” (10) which she immediately joined.

At first it may be hard for readers to believe that throughout the first twenty three years of her life Maitland experienced no positive effects of physical silence,¹ for instance during a family excursion in nature, or on a lone walk in the forest. However, later a reader may realise that the way he or she perceives the impact of the external lack or muting of sounds on his or her own mind may vary from the way that Maitland may have responded to it at that time in her life. Indeed, when she mentions her trip to the Grand Canyon in Arizona just after finishing high school, she admits that it was too early for her to be able to enjoy the profound silence of such a place (8). As she herself later notices (187), “it is possible to experience external silence without any sense of interior silence [...]”. Hence it was probably an inability to calm down mentally which prevented her from enjoying the physical silence offered by such experiences as the previously mentioned.

In fact, Maitland claims that her first positive encounter with silence occurred in 1973, a year after she married an Anglican vicar from the United States. It was during her daughter’s night feeds that she had her “first experience of positive nourishing silence” (11). The second place where she started to experience the joy of a silent, peaceful life was a cottage in Warkton near Northampton. Maitland bought the cottage in 1980, after her marriage disintegrated and she converted to Catholicism. From then on, solitude and silence are intricately connected for her, and examining different forms of silence becomes an important part of her life. While describing the advantages of living in Warkton, at the beginning Maitland focuses on silence mainly as an exterior phenomenon, and here we can see that the way she perceives it is indeed dictated

¹ “Physical silence” as the absence or muting of sounds audible to the human ear.

by her personal preferences, as she describes the sounds made by water and wind as far more “silent” than for example the sound of speech. However, shortly afterwards, she also starts to reflect on what can be described as inner silence, equanimity: “...as time passes I increasingly realise there is an interior dimension to silence, a sort of stillness of heart and mind which is not a void, but a reach space” (26).

2. Eight positive sensations

In order to explore this “reach space” which Maitland slowly started to discover within herself, in 2000, when she turned fifty, she decided to move to County Durham, to an “ex-winch engineer’s cottage” (33) in the moorlands, above Weardale. She did this because life in the village had become too noisy for her, in the sense that everybody knew her and she felt that she had to be constantly involved in what was happening there. Moreover, Maitland gives four reasons for why she decided to move to Weardale: “First, I wanted to understand silence better. [...] I wanted to explore my own spirituality and deepen my growing sense of the reality of God, [...] I wanted more silence because I enjoyed the small amount I was getting. [...] I wanted to dig deeper into my writing. I had [...] reached a point where I no longer had the simple confidence in narrative and storytelling, which had sustained a steady flow of work for over twenty years” (32-33).

To achieve those goals even more immediately she decided to depart from her newly acquired house and spent forty days in a place which was yet more distant: the Isle of Skye in Scotland. To intensify this experience she decided to spend this time without saying a single word. The decision to spend this time alone and not in some religious community is well justified:

[...] at this point I wanted to separate prayer from silence. My imagination is so “Christianised” that I felt those sorts of ideas could have overridden other feelings in a monastic context with holy pic-

tures [...] on every wall. I did not want to go on a “retreat” [...] I wanted to explore my conviction that silence was something positive, not just an abstraction or absence.” (37-38)

This is one of the places in Maitland’s book in which she points out that Christianity is one of the religious traditions in which silence is largely perceived as a lack of something, as an “abstraction”.² In order to enrich her religious practice by incorporating silence into it, she paradoxically distances herself from the religious community, focusing on getting to know herself and her own needs better.

After the stay on Skye, Maitland describes eight positive experiences (or “sensations”) which are the outcome of this period. The first she calls the “intensification of physical sensation” (48) when all the senses sharpen as a result of the absence of sounds; the second is “disinhibition” (52), i.e. breaking with all possible social norms from the point of view of behaviour (she mentions for example walking naked around the house all day long, picking her nose while eating, etc.); the third, “hearing voices” (57), meaning experiencing auditory hallucinations; the fourth, the experience of an utter joy, a sense of “givenness” (62).³ Fifth comes the “sensation of boundary confusion”, which is clarified by the author in the following way: “If an individual is one with and a part of *everything*, then it is not going to be clear where the self begins and ends” (Maitland 2008: 66); sixth, “the exhilarating sense of peril that is associated with silence”, an emotional response to silence that, as she notes, can be mistaken for insanity by some people (72); seventh, the sensation of “ineffability” of the

² Obviously, within Christian tradition there are groups whose members incorporate silence in their daily religious practice, but these are mainly monks and nuns or followers of certain Christian movements, such as Quakers, whom Maitland mentions later in her account. What she has in mind is rather a certain general attitude of lay people towards silence which derives *inter alia* from the way it is presented in the Scriptures (the myth of creation). This shall be discussed further in the next section of the paper.

³ The *Oxford English Dictionary* (1972: 1149) defines “givenness” as “the fact of being given or posited”; what Maitland has in mind here is experiencing a moment as a pure gift which is exceptional and cannot be repeated.

experience of silence (74); and finally, the experience of “the state of bliss – a fierce joy, far beyond ‘happiness’ or ‘pleasure’” (72). As Maitland points out, all eight experiences derived from staying in a quiet and secluded environment positively influenced her perception of the external world and allowed her to develop emotionally and spiritually.

It should be added that each time Maitland relates her own experiences, she refers to the similar experiences of other people – writers, mystics, philosophers, travellers etc. She also ponders legends, myths and fairy tales in which silence is often the main focus. She mentions a variety of written works as she looks for inspiration and also for explanations of the mental and physical states that she finds herself in through exposing herself to silence in diverse places. For instance, in this chapter (“Forty Days and Forty Nights”), she gives the reader examples from the stories of other people who also spent a certain period of time in seclusion. Among these is Henry David Thoreau, who after staying two years, two months, and two days in a cabin, which he built with his own hands deep in the forest near Walden Pond, described his experiences in the book *Walden*, first published in 1854. Another is Richard Byrd, a polar explorer from the US who decided to spend the winter alone in the Antarctic and later wrote a book entitled *Alone: the Classic Polar Adventure* (1938). Maitland and the two aforementioned authors perceived the working of an external silence positively, as they themselves decided to stay in seclusion and could come back from the retreat whenever they wanted to. But what happens if one is forced to stay in a silent environment involuntarily?

3. Silence – best friend or worst foe?

Apart from the experiences that she perceives as positive, Maitland also mentions aspects of being exposed to silence, which had an adverse influence on her and thanks to which she slowly started to understand its subjective aspect. For instance, when still on Skye, she describes a seriously frighten-

ing experience that she had while walking from Luib to Loch Slapin:

I left the car and walked up the path, and after a couple of hundred yards it turned round a knoll and I walked into *nowhere*. It was a tight, steep-sided glen that I could not see out of [...] suddenly I was 'spooked' [...] Gradually I became convinced I was being watched [...] There were two dwarf fairy cows, with huge eyes [...] I thought, these were ghost cattle [...] I felt that the silence was stripping me down, desiccating, denuding me [...] What it was for me [...] was panic [...] I was not 'frightened of' or 'scared by' ... this was something from much lower down and further in, something really visceral. I fled, literally. (81-2)

In fact she admits that after leaving Skye she went looking for those negative experiences too: "I wanted to understand [...] the dark disintegration, the howling emptiness, the demons of the desert hermits" (83). Ultimately, she got what she asked for. In March 2001, while she was staying in County Durham, Maitland experienced an involuntary period of silence. One day the road to her house was cut off by a blizzard. Since the phone lines were down too, she became gradually more and more anxious about her own safety and the safety of her family. It was the first time that she had really become physically and mentally tired of the silence that surrounded her, because her brain began playing tricks on her. She writes: "One afternoon I needed to break out and I took a walk up the undriveable road [...] Then, about half a mile from the house, I started to hear the most agonised wailing noises – the wailing, it seemed to me then, of the damned. I was completely terrified" (85). Later, she noticed that the sound was coming from "Aeolian harps or organ pipes" which were responding to the wind with these sounds and concludes: "[...] I was lucky that I identified the source of the noise fairly quickly, because otherwise it would have driven me insane" (85).

Afterwards, astounded by the fact that the silence of the place she was confined within, normally a source of joy and tranquillity, had made her feel desperate and finally filled her

with terror, she started to search through some scientific sources to find information about the destructive influence that the absence of sound can have on people. Her search led her to Dr Stuart Grassian's publication ("Psychiatric Effects of Solitary Confinement") in which he proves that the mental problems of his patients (which often even developed into psychotic madness) were caused by solitary confinement involving exposure to physical silence and the experience of partial sensory deprivation.

Trying to compare her eight positive sensations with Grassian's discussion of "The Specific Psychiatric Syndrome[s] Associated with Solitary Confinement" (Grassian 2006: 335), Maitland notices that virtually the same states of mind which she initially viewed as positive were perceived by Grassian's patients as destructive, because they were exposed to them involuntarily. For instance, what she called "intensification of physical sensation", Grassian calls "hyperresponsivity to external stimuli" (particularly noise) (335). Similarly, for a prisoner, Maitland's "sense of 'givenness'" might very likely become "intrusive obsessional thoughts" (336). In turn, what Maitland experienced as a "thrilling sense of risk or peril", Grassian diagnoses as "overt paranoia" (336) etc.

Interestingly, other researchers working with people who stayed in solitary confinement for long periods and experienced sensory deprivation confirm Grassian's findings.⁴ Additionally, according to numerous studies, the occurrence of symptoms like those enumerated by the American psychiatrist results in both mental and physical deterioration. As Elizabeth Palermo (2015, n.p.) notes, "Studies have linked this form of isolation to more physical symptoms, including chronic headaches, heart palpitations, oversensitivity to light and noise stimuli, muscle pain, weight loss, digestive problems, dizziness, and loss of appetite". She also recalls a theory of a Mich-

⁴ See, e.g. Brownfield, Charles (1965). *Isolation: Clinical and Experimental Approaches*. New York: Random House; Cota, G., & Hodins, S. (1990). "Co-occurring mental disorders among criminal offenders". *Bulletin of the American Academy of Psychiatry and Law* 18 (March 1990): 271-281.

igan University neuroscientist, Huda Akil, who believes that “the [human] brain actually needs positive human interactions to stay healthy. Social interaction may activate growth factors in the brain, helping brain cells regrow [...]” (n.p). Therefore, lack of mental nourishment in the form of social interactions may ultimately be fatal for people. As an example Emily Coffey (2012, 18-19) describes the case of John Jay Powers who after his arrival at ADX (a federal super-maximum security prison in Fremont County, CO) was forced to stay in a small dark, silent cell without windows for 23 hours a day where he, “amputated his testicle and scrotum, bit off two fingers, tattooed his entire body, and repeatedly attempted suicide”. Finally the sentence drove Powers insane. Coffey also adds that because of the severe and often irreversible damage which solitary confinement has on people “Juan Mendez, U.N. Special Rapporteur on Torture, has declared it torture” (18).

Jason Breslow (2014, n.p.) mentions the results of yet another study carried out by researchers at McGill University on a group of male graduate students who were supposed to stay in small chambers and could leave only to use the bathroom. As he writes,

They wore goggles and earphones to limit their sense of sight and hearing, and gloves to limit their sense of touch. The plan was to observe students for six weeks, but not one lasted more than seven days. Nearly every student lost the ability “to think clearly about anything for any length of time,” while several others began to suffer hallucinations. “One man could see nothing but dogs,” wrote one of the study’s collaborators, “another nothing but eyeglasses of various types, and so on (n.p.).

On the basis of this study it is possible to see that even people who volunteered to stay in confinement suffered from serious negative side effects of sensory deprivation. At the same time it seems that the lack of stimuli in the form of sounds or images played only an indirect role in causing the psychic and physical reactions, both positive and negative. The key idea was an ability or inability to cope with one’s own thoughts (images,

voices) and with the feelings that intensified as a result of staying in silent surroundings. That is why the voluntary or involuntary nature of one's exposure to silence is so important, because if the exposure is not voluntary, then the individual has no control over what happens to him or her and has no other choice but to face his or her personal problems, weaknesses and traumas, the "demons" from which one normally tries to escape. Additionally, as in Maitland's case, the brains of such individuals will play tricks on them and there is no one else to whom they can turn to and who can verify if what they are experiencing is true or just their vivid imagination. Moreover, in the case of someone who is imprisoned as a consequence of a crime, the reaction to a silent environment may be even worse, as stifling the voice of conscience may become impossible.

Later in the book Maitland starts to trace the descriptions of the experience of involuntary silence in prose narratives – legends, myths, documentaries, novels – and gives examples of circumstances involving this kind of silence in order to further investigate what factors make experiencing silence pleasant, blissful, or terrifying. Among such circumstances is marooning, an individual being set on an isolated island, as for instance in the story of Alexander Selkirk who became the "prototype" for Daniel Defoe's *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1719). Although the main character, Robinson Crusoe, is fortunate enough to be shipwrecked on an island abundant in animals, fruits and fresh water, he also has to face the fact that he is there all alone. Nevertheless, he manages to overcome all his fears and the inner doubts that he experiences as a result of living in solitude. He does this mainly by reading the Bible, contemplating its words and submitting himself to God's providence,

I was earnestly begging of God to give me repentance, when it happen'd providentially the very day that reading the Scripture, I came these words, *He is exalted a prince and a saviour, to give repentance, and to give remission*: I threw down the book, and

with my heart as well as my hands lifted up to Heaven, in a kind of extasy of joy, I cry'd out aloud, *Jesus, thou son of David, Jesus, thou exalted prince and saviour, give me repentance!* This was the first time that I could say, in the true sense of the words, that I pray'd in all my life; for now I pray'd with a sense of my condition, and with a true Scripture view of hope founded on the encouragement of the word of God; and from this time, I may say, I began to have hope that God would hear me. (Defoe 2012, 93)

In the extreme situation that Crusoe finds himself, he starts to treat the Bible as a guidepost, which sets the direction for the path he decides to follow. It provides him with the spiritual support, which he desperately needs and which at this moment cannot be offered to him by another person.

Another example is isolation due to an accident; here Maitland references the story of Joe Simpson, an English mountaineer who, after being abandoned by his partner, Simon Yates, in a situation which threatened the lives of both climbers and left Simpson with his thigh broken, survived four days in a crevasse below the top of Siula Grande (6,356 metres). Simpson miraculously managed to make his way out of the crevasse and then, unable to walk, crawled down the most inhospitable terrain, and succeeded in reaching the base camp just before his crew planned to leave it. His account of the physical and mental suffering caused by pain and exposure to physical silence can be found in the book *Touching the Void* (1988).⁵ His story, like that of the fictional Robinson Crusoe, is one of the examples from which the reader can see that the effects of external absence of audible sounds on the mind of someone who experiences the absence involuntarily are not always destructive. Indeed, the main thing which occurred as a result of the prolonged silence and lack of food and drink, the thing that allowed Simpson to survive this extreme situation was the “*voice*”. As he himself describes it:

⁵ On YouTube it is possible to find a full-time documentary with the same title, in which Simpson himself retells this story.

It was as if there were two minds within me arguing the toss. The *voice* was clean and sharp and commanding. It was always right, and I listened to it when it spoke and acted on its decisions. The other mind rambled out a disconnected series of images, and memories, and hopes, which I attended to in a daydream state as I set about obeying the orders of the *voice*. (Simpson 2004, 141)

But for this inner “*voice*”, Simpson surely would have lost the battle against the feeling of excessive loneliness, the partial sensory deprivation, the enormous physical pain, hunger and thirst, the hallucinations and a permanent half dream state and loss of mental control he was experiencing while desperately trying to descend to the camp, “A cold clinical side of me assessed everything, decided what to do and made me to do it. The rest was madness – a hazy blur of images so vivid and real that I lost myself in their spell” (145). (A similar phenomenon is described by Maitland as “‘stress voices’, a kind of self-splitting which occurs under extreme and difficult circumstances” (58)). Therefore, despite the fact that Simpson’s case sets a kind of a precedent in relation to what was stated earlier on the basis of scientific findings, it should be noted that, as a mountaineer, Simpson was accustomed to stillness, to the dead silence characteristically found high in the mountains, and to staying in solitude in very hard conditions. He was, therefore, used to being alone with himself, with his own thoughts and worries. If this had not been the case, the prolonged silence and harsh conditions could have become one of the causes of his death. Surprisingly, even this traumatic experience did not stop Simpson from climbing. He subsequently published books with the telling titles *Storms of Silence* (1997) and *The Beckoning Silence* (2002) about his other expeditions.

4. Cultural conditioning

In the fourth chapter, “Silence and the Gods”⁶, Maitland points out that in various traditions silence is perceived differently and that it is closely connected with the story of creation. As she points out, “Judaism, Christianity and Islam – are highly verbal narrative faiths [“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and *the Word was God.*” (*Bible, the New Testament* 1998: Gospel of John 1:1, 147); emphasis added] [...] Naturally a culture that sees power in speaking is likely to develop a creation-by-fiat story. And such culture will obviously see silence as lack, silence as absence, not merely as negative, but as blank” (120). Additionally, mentioning in this context the scientific theory of the Big Bang, Maitland finally comes to the conclusion that the “fear of silence is deeply embedded in the Western psyche” (128). Then she collates the myth of creation presented by those three religious traditions with Maori, North, Egyptian, Aboriginal and Greek myths according to which silence is an integral part of creation: “In all these stories, instead of having an abrupt singularity, a sharp-edged instant marking the beginning, a sound breaking the silence, the whole process is much more gradual. Time and silence come together in a slow, even piecemeal, creative drama” (125). In these traditions silence is perceived positively, as a “creative, generative power” (126). On the basis of this chapter, the reader can see that the way one perceives silence, for instance associating it with fear, danger, and lack, or else with peacefulness, joy, and pleasure, is to a great extent conditioned by the religious and cultural traditions and social groups that one belongs to.

In the fifth chapter, “Silent Places”, the author turns to nature writing, as she becomes interested in the harmony which nature is endowed with and which indeed is associated with silence, not only by her but also by other authors she men-

⁶ One should note that “Gods” is spelled with a capital letter, as this is one of the hints that, while herself a devout Catholic, Maitland respects other religious traditions.

tions. Still, it is not only harmony that attracts her. Fear, too, is associated with the dark forest: “I knew there were wolves in the forest; there were witches in the forest; there were demons. I was haunted by the silence of the forest, which is the silence of the fairy stories” (175). She decided to go to Glen Affric in the Great Caledonian Forest in order to overcome this fear, as she knew it was to a great extent imagined, and most importantly, also because she knew that it was something which limited her as a writer:

[...] these stories had been my territory as a writer for a long time [...] Thinking now about silence I had to accept that, along with feminist reinterpretation and my desire for fiction that explores universal human themes, I had been writing my own fears, my own darkness and my own profound sense that violence and beauty, risk and joy, are inextricably tangled together; and the roots lie in the forest”. (175)

However, after the three days which she spent there, she admitted that in the end it “did not cure [her] of being scared of it” (284), but it made her sure that the silence of the wild, dark wood and stories associated with it were among the main reasons why some of us fear silence and see it as something negative.

5. Conclusions

All in all, as one reads Maitland’s book and the other literary and scientific sources mentioned in this article, one realises that the spectrum of ideas that can be associated with silence is exceptionally vast, as well as that the notion of silence is relative and the way it is perceived by each individual is conditioned by various factors. For me, from the perspective of experiencing the dark side of silence as an effect of involuntary confinement and sensory deprivation (on which Maitland sheds much light), the most important conclusion the readers can draw is that depending on how well we are acquainted

with ourselves, how well we realise what our needs and feelings are, and how honest we are both with ourselves and with others, the exposure to such a simple and obvious thing as the absence of audible sounds can become either a pleasant experience or a nightmare. Furthermore, bearing in mind that experiencing a period of involuntary silence is something that can happen to anyone at any time, the reader may be encouraged to follow Maitland in her search for silence, or rather in her search for herself. As *A Book of Silence* implies, if we do this, if we show courage and make the necessary effort to know our own selves, to become aware of the things that disturb our peace of mind (and therefore body), then we will be able to trust more, as Hamlet would have it, to what appears “in [our] mind’s eye” (*H* 1.2, 166) during extreme or difficult situations that any one of us might come across. Then, silence will most probably become our best friend, and not our worst enemy.

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Aneta Wadowska
ORCID iD: 0000-0002-3603-3985
Filologiczne Studia Doktoranckie
Uniwersytet Gdański
ul. Wita Stwosza 51
80-308 Gdańsk
Poland
wadowska.aneta@gmail.com