“No man is an island”? The Department of German held a multi-disciplinary conference on insularity in Valletta from 21st to 23rd November, 2013

An island is an island. An island is not an island. A contradiction? Malta, for instance, completely surrounded by the sea, is geographically an island par excellence. But it is known for more: the island of the Knights, the island of history, the island of St Paul, the language island, the island of bravery, the island of happiness, the island of…? From this point of view, a small island might be somehow ‘bigger’ than what the name suggests. And as essentially involved in globalization, global trade and communication and a European and Arabic history, Malta is anything other than isolated. Metaphorically speaking, Malta is no island.

An exploration of the term ‘insularity’ may yield surprising insights. The conference “Insularity. Representations and Constructions of Small Worlds” from 21st to 23rd November 2013 tackled the fascinating issue of islands and insularity, its implications and outcomes in societies and litera-
ture, culture and language from multidisciplinary perspectives.

The conference was generously funded by the University of Malta, the German Embassy, Valletta, and the Fritz Thyssen Foundation. It was held in Europe House with the kind support of the European Commission, Valletta, and Valletta Campus. Professor Alfred J. Vella, Pro-Rector of the University of Malta, Professor Dominic Fenech, Dean of the Faculty of Arts, and Professor Mario Vassallo, Head of the Department of German, opened the conference. The Department of German would like to thank all sponsors and participants for making this event a highly enjoyable and successful one.

The English poet John Donne’s famous verse ‘No man is an Island’ is paradigmatic of the metaphorical use of the island as the epitome of seclusion and isolation of the individual. It also expresses that a human being is never alone, that all of us are part of a collective, be it a family, a group, a society or a nation. The actual connotation of “island” implies much more than its bare geographical-geological factuality. It is highly metaphorical, and metaphors or images are the best and most difficult companions of the arts. That is why insularity was, and is, an important issue in literature, with the most famous expression found in Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe.

The current discourse of globalization may easily mask the fact that insular spaces in the metaphorical sense still exist and are even multiplying. Growing poverty, limited migration and other forms of exclusion make insularity a highly topical issue despite the seeming interconnectedness among communities and nations. At the same time, in the cultural memory of various societies, the small world of the island is richly populated with fictions, myths, utopias, dystopias, images and metaphors.

In various sections on theory, language islands, aesthetic and intercultural reflections of insularity in literature, social and cultural studies and intermediality, the conference explored the multi-faceted aspects of real as well as imaginary forms of insularity.
The philosophical dimensions of the concept were discussed, as well as its political, economic and social implications. Contributions across disciplinary boundaries analyzed discursive constructions of insularity in various fields such as sociology, political sciences, geography and linguistics, as well as in literary and filmic fiction.

This multi-disciplinary engagement with – metaphorical as well as real – insularity led, for instance, to a critical questioning of the terminology itself: the term ‘islandness’ was suggested as a more neutral alternative to ‘insularity’, and one which may be more apt, especially when attempting to challenge preconceptions of geographical island situations as perceived by ‘non-islanders’. The inverted commas used here indicate that the very definition of real islands and their inhabitants is not a straightforward case, but a matter of debate and social construction: even the common association of islands and smallness can therefore be called into question.

On a metaphorical level, it is, however, the concept of small, secluded and self-contained spaces which dominates notions of insularity. But in this context also, the idea of a closed-off ‘small world’ can be counter-balanced with the notion of insular situations as ones especially inclined towards opening up to the outside world, and as being special spaces for encounters with difference: hybrid meeting places of notions often conceived as binary oppositions, such as land and sea, culture and nature, man and woman, reason and myth etc.

The engagement with metaphorical insularity was developed through contributions from international scholars, for example Dr Thomas Freller (former lecturer at the Department of German), Visiting Professor Carola Hilmes (Department of Ger-
man), Dr Ulrich Hackenbruch (former member of the German Embassy in Malta) as well as in contributions from Departments of Modern Languages at the University of Malta: German (Katrin Dautel, Dr Kathrin Schödel), English (Professor Ivan Callus, Dr James Corby, Dr Mario Aquilina), Maltese (Dr Adrian Grima) and French (Professor Richard Spiteri), as well as the Department of History of Art (Dr Giuseppe Schembri Bonaci, Irene Biolchini) and the Department of Arts and Languages in Education (George Cremona).

The section on linguistics also combined papers by international and Maltese scholars: Dr Stavros Assimakopoulos, Professor Ray Fabri (Institute of Linguistics), Professor Lydia Sciriha (English), Dr Ralf Heimrath and Dr Arndt Kremer (Department of German).