PROBLEMATIZING THE ‘CRITICAL’ IN LOCAL PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES

Daniel de Mello FERRAZ
danielferrazufes@gmail.com
Universidade Federal do Espírito Santo (UFES)

ABSTRACT
According to Pennycook (2010), the "critical" has reached a level of saturation provided that many fields of knowledge have added the term (critical discourse analysis, critical literacy, critical sociolinguistics) as a way to position themselves in relation to its non-critical counterparts. This can be problematic in the sense that the binary oppositions are perpetuated in power relations where the “best” is the “critical” and the worst is the non-critical. Should we then abandon the term or keep on problematizing it? In local contexts, is there still the need for criticality? This paper seeks to answer these questions by analyzing some activities in two disciplines of the Foreign Languages-English undergraduate course of the Federal University of Espirito Santo. At first, I analyze some possible meanings assigned to the term critical and, secondly, I discuss two pedagogical practices performed under critical perspectives.

Keywords: Critical Language Education; Teaching practices; Critique.

1. INTRODUCTION: APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND CRITICAL APPLIED LINGUISTICS

“How can we define language without being an essentialist?”, How different is Applied Linguistics from Critical Applied Linguistics?”, “Why theorize the term critical if our courses show pedagogical practices that deny it?”, “It seems that teachers don’t
want to listen to our voices”, “How can the problematizing practice work in the classroom?”, “Why is it important to be critical?, Or, is it not?”. These are some of the questionings and positionings of my undergraduate students when presented to Critical Applied Linguistics (CAL), theorized by Pennycook (2010), Rajagopalan (2006), Monte Mór (2008, 2009), Hawkins and Norton (2009), among others. According to Borelli and Pessoa (2011, p.15), “recent studies in Applied Linguistics (AL) have advocated the need for reviewing the principles that underlie the research in this area, and suggested new directions that would promote a more critical performance of applied linguists”. For Pennycook (2010) this tendency to view AL as CAL ought to be problematized, once the critical has reached a level of saturation, i.e., several fields of knowledge have added the term “critical” (critical discourse analysis, critical sociolinguistics, critical studies of translation, critical pedagogy, etc.) as a way to position themselves in relation to their “non-critical” peers. This can be problematic as far as the binary divisions are kept in unequal power relations: “critical” usually conveys a “positive” connotation of better or superior whereas non-critical is the least appreciated. We are thus caught in a binary trap which, I imagine, CAL seeks to deconstruct and problematize. Should we, therefore, abandon the term “critical”? In local contexts, for instance, my practice in the Foreign Languages - English course of a Brazilian Federal University in which criticality issues are not usually taken into account, would the inclusion of critique be relevant? Although we agree with Pennycook (2010) in regard to the saturation of the term and with Monte Mór (2015) about the different meanings assigned to the term, the aim of this investigation is to show that, when trying to act as intellectual teachers (GIROUX, 1997) or as researcher-teachers of our own classrooms (BORELLI and PESSOA, 2011. P. 25), the promotion and the emphasis on criticality are necessary. Still in the authors’ words, “in order to act critically, the teacher should understand his role in society and his responsibility as a transforming agent, as well as attempt to be aware of the external forces that intervene in education”. They go on arguing that “the context of investigation and knowledge production acquires, therefore, a new configuration in which researchers work together with teachers who are also researchers (ibid, p. 28). Thus, we look for a problematizing practice (PENNYCOOK, 2010) in which the roles of teacher and researcher / researcher and teacher are interconnected and dialogue in order to understand their praxis. The
definitions of AL and CAL and the problematizations of the term “critical” (PENNYCOOK, 2010; RAJAGOPALAN, 2003), the interpretative expansions and education through foreign/additional languages (MONTE MÓR, 2007, 2009, 2011), as well as the perspectives about post-structuralism (MENEZES DE SOUZA, 2010, 2011) span the theoretical inspirations of this investigation. The methodology used is qualitative, of auto-ethnographic nature, and the method of research-action was applied. In short, the investigation was carried out in two groups of the Foreign Languages - English undergraduate course in the Federal University of Espírito Santo, the first composed of 16 students of the fourth semester and the second of approximately 35 students of the first semester. The classes were given in English and there were moments of code switching to Portuguese language. Hence, in this paper I firstly problematize three possible meanings assigned to the term critical. Hereinafter, I analyze the PPP (Pedagogical Project Proposal) which was implemented in 2006, and discuss two pedagogical practices (two projects) undertaken with the groups, in order to demonstrate how the term critical was developed in both projects. Some conclusions point to a need for discussing critical/criticality not only in some specific classes, but also in the whole curriculum (in rhizomatic ways) if we want both AL and CAL to contribute to the education of these future teachers. Likewise, I emphasize the necessity to attentively listen to our students, who long for an education which makes sense for them.

2. THE MEANINGS OF ‘CRITICAL’

The epistemic diversity of the world is potentially infinite. There is no ignorance or knowledge in general. All ignorance is ignorance of a certain knowledge, and all knowledge is the overcoming of a particular ignorance. There are no complete knowledges

Souza-Santos, Beyond abyssal thinking.

Although I agree with Pennycook’s assertion (2010) that the term critical is saturated, I advocate that in several contexts it should still be problematized. Freire (1996), Saviani (1990) and Bordieu (1982) have, for some decades, emphasized the criticality as something essential for us to think about education, philosophy and social
relations. For Saviani, the term critical should be problematized, once in several contexts it is still seen as the critique that is reproduced (i.e., the critical-reproductivism). Bourdieu (ibid.) claims that the critical awareness is necessary for us to understand how the symbolic capitals circulate differently. For instance, the English language, as symbolic, cultural and economic capital is seen as a product (commodity) to be acquired and added by individuals who aim at economic and cultural growth. Corroborating Ricoeur’s theories (1978) about interpretation and the studies by Monte Mór (2008, 2009, 2010, 2013) about language education in Brazil, I discuss some notions about the term critical, which I have sought not only to problematize theoretically, but also bring to my daily pedagogical practices.

The first idea of critical (being critical, think critically, critique) concerns the suspension of truths, discourses (e.g. the Great narratives truths). Ricoeur (ibid.) proposes that this suspension/suspicion be accomplished through the multiplicity of interpretations. By attempting to move away from the perspectives of Critical Reading which aimed at restoring the author’s intention, Ricoeur (1978) proposes that we think about the interpretive process as emerging from the function of being-in-the-world, once the subject only relates to the world through reflexive processes, where the interpretation is the process. Still according to the author, it is always possible to argue against an interpretation, confront interpretations or arbitrate between them so that an agreement is reached, even if this agreement is beyond our reach. In this perspective, the critique takes place when we ‘suspect’ the truths (or discourses) around us, and it is the one related to the understanding that they (the discourses) are contextual interpretations of a certain object or situation, and not everlasting truths. In this respect, Monte Mór (2008) claims that

Ricoeur, therefore, proposes that the hermeneutics of suspicion may be in accordance with the interpretation exercise, considering that it allows the listeners to question the meanings given by interpretative practices of religious or traditional orientation, and to make their own situated meanings (MONTE MÓR: 2008, p. 10).
Looking critically at mass media (Picture 1 above) can help us understand critique as the suspension of truths. For Merton and Lazarsfeld (2000), “the ubiquity of mass media leads us to the belief, almost magical, in its enormous power” (p. 110). Nevertheless, the authors enhance that there are several kinds of social control that powerful groups, among which the organized business world, occupy a prominent position and have been adopting techniques “to manipulate the mass audience through propaganda, instead of applying more direct ways of control” (my emphasis, MERTON and LAZARSFELD: 2000 p. 110). Taking part in the debate, Azevedo (2006) states that some of the most remarkable characteristics of our media system remain unchangeable: the monopoly of some powerful families and their ownership of the mass media, the small external diversity from the political point of view, and the conservative bias (p. 89). It is common knowledge that mass media are controlled, in our country, by the powerful groups which adopt their policies at service of the neoliberalism, i.e, printed press, TV news, soap operas and commercials have, as some of their main objectives, the profit, the sales, the inculcation of discourses, and the influence on the national politics. In Brazil, in relation to the ‘great mass media’ (the TV), the most direct and accurate indicator about the centrality of television in the information and entertainment market is the number of television sets in family homes measured by IBGE, that is to say there are about 47 million sets in the Brazilian houses totaling 90% of houses (AZEVEDO: 2006, p. 96). Another example of media influence, the website Youtube - which considered democratic due to the possibility of free access and postings - is actually the third biggest digital company in the world with more than a

1 http://www.novarepublika.cz/2015/03/oligarchove-okupanti-medialniho-prostoru.html
billion users monthly\(^2\). Its profitability comes from advertisements that appear, sometimes unnoticeably (and forcefully) on the page, before and after the video views.

Another example about this critical look in relation to the media is the documentary *Brazil Beyond Citizen Kane*, produced by BBC in 1993 (and forbidden in our country). It discusses the power of Rede Globo de Televisão which at that time reached 90% of audience rates in its soap operas (this meant about 40 million homes watching this genre). Suspending and suspecting such exorbitant numbers of digital media and television broadcasts help us apprehend the inculcations, acknowledge that we are highly influenced by television, and understand why we vote for clowns to represent us politically. At the same time, suspending the views advocated by the BBC documentary, for example, means being aware that, once it is a company which also aims at profit and, somehow it is a TV Globo’s competitor, it might have had interest in producing such film and such interpretations. It is noteworthy that every documentary is a narrative that intends to produce ‘a truth’ about one or more facts.

A second concept about critique, disruption, helps us understand the transformation processes, the possibility of breaking paradigms and the questioning of ingrained concepts. Still inspired by Monte Mór’s and Ricouer’s words, critique as disruption refers to all the moments in which, by encountering the other (subject or object), we become aware of changes in our ‘thinking the world’. An example of disruption for me is literature, i.e., it is through journeys enabled by Clarice Lispector’s, Elisa Lucinda’s or Edgar Allan Poe’s tales; also by the works of Machado de Assis and Oscar Wilde that the disruptions take place in my imagination and are transported to “real life”. This example tells us a lot about what I am calling disruption, because I think that the “critical” disruptions are simple moments in which we end up transformed, thinking differently from our ingrained concepts. A great disruption happened in my classroom, which inspired me to do a post-doctorate in an area which was completely different from what I had been researching: the area of gender, sexuality, homosexuality, homophobia and education. In Ferraz (2014a), I narrated:

> The fact occurred while I was giving classes in the technology college where I taught, an environment which was extremely focused on technological, technical and rational orientations (and somehow

\(^2\) [http://googlediscovery.com/2013/05/21/youtube-completa-oito-anos-com-numeros-impressionantes/]
heteronormative). I was giving a class when, at a certain point, my students started to make fun of each other, calling each other gays. The joke, which came from a context of gay parade in the city of São Paulo (it had taken place the previous weekend) was: “So, did you go to the gay parade to meet your friends?” “Hey, teacher, the guy over there is gay and went to the parade!” For the first time in so many years in the classroom, I had to interrupt these jokes and said: “You, with these kinds of comments, won’t get anywhere! It’s a great lack of respect and prejudice”. Although I can’t remember the exact words I used, I can perfectly recall my reaction: the fear accumulated for years, fear of the insult against the classmate, which affected me instantaneously (FERRAZ: 2014a, p.2).

These insults emerged in the disruptions necessary for me to initiate a process of questioning about this and so many other situations that indicated initial levels of homophobia and that disturbed and afflicted me enormously (for having always been the gay teacher “inside the closet”). The disruption (and liberation) process took place with the boldness to research, publish and bring the topic to my pedagogical practices (FERRAZ, 2014a, 2014b).

The third sense of critique, the meaning making process, can also be understood as a possibility to develop criticality, once meanings are not given and are not fixed. In the case of Portuguese language education, for example, Antunes (2010) warns us that “the meanings and intentions expressed in what we say are results of contextual, textual, lexical and grammatical determinations, which act beyond what is shown on the surface” (ANTUNES, 2010, p. 15). Going back to Ricouer (1978), the philosopher supports the idea that the distancing by the subject in his relation with the text is necessary and productive, being a key condition in the process of appropriation. According to the author, it is only through the distance imposed between text and reader that the latter manages to abdicate himself to embrace other subjectivities (and other meanings). This movement (distancing and returning to himself) is configured as the ways of being and doing in the world. An example of the possibilities to make meanings comes from the cinema.

The documentary Waste Land, by Vik Muniz ³, reports an art project carried out with waste pickers of one of the world’s largest landfills, Jardim Gramacho, in the

³ http://www.lixoextraordinario.net/
suburbs of Rio Janeiro. Pictures 2 and 3 below are photographs transformed into art, taken in the shed where the Project took place. Firstly, Vik Muniz portrayed the “real” wishes of the pickers, where each one chose how (s)he wished to be artistically “represented”. After this process, the photographs were projected/outlined in a huge shed and what we see below is some of the final products of a collective effort of several pickers, who fulfilled the space of the huge shed with thousands of scrapped objects. They are toilet lids, tyres, rubber, refrigerator doors, pieces of stoves, tins, fabrics, wires, everything turned artwork:

![Image 2 – Waste Land](image2.jpg)

![Image 3 – Waste Land](image3.jpg)

The project aimed at giving a new meaning to the waste and transforming it into art. The people in the documentary, waste pickers, go through a critical experience in terms of meaning making. They were used to seeing the waste as something bad, derogatory, but at the same time as their only alternative of life. By making art from the waste, they had the opportunity to, through the social practice involved in the production of art, give a new meaning to those materials. Interestingly, one of the main characters of the film declares: “we don’t collect waste, but recyclable material. You throw away waste, but not recyclable material!” According to Vik Muniz himself, the objective was “to photograph a group of pickers of recyclable materials. However, the work with these characters reveals the dignity and the despair they face when we suggested re-imagining their lives out of that environment”[^4]. Still for Muniz, this “reveals the transforming power of art and the alchemy of human spirit”. Lastly, there was also a disruption with a traditional and linear view of “waste means bad”, i.e., we

can interpret that the pickers went through a deep change of perspective in their relation with the waste in a linguistic/semantic perspective (with the resignification of waste to recyclable material) and in a sociocultural perspective (the everyday “waste”, by being turned into art, transformed their lives).

In the subsequent chapter, I seek to connect the ideas of critique explored above with some pedagogical practices that I have been carrying out in my context. I do not intend that these activities be “recipes”, let alone necessarily seen as critical activities. When the context is different, so is the view. However, paradoxically, I hope they are interpreted as practices that can be inspirations to other school contexts.

3. LOCAL PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES

The activities analyzed were applied in some disciplines of the Foreign Languages-English course of the Federal University of Espírito Santo, namely: English Language Teaching Project, Academic Writing and Semantics. According to the Pedagogical Project Proposal (PPP) of the Foreign Languages-English undergraduate course, some of the challenges of the course are:

- Definition of **transdisciplinary competences** as main objectives of the learning-teaching process to be reached by means of specific knowledge construction
- **Contextualization of contents**, with emphasis on the relation between the concepts being worked and their practical application. Form professionals who are capable of contextualize and apply the knowledge on the citizen’s daily life and on the development of his professional activities
- Integration of disciplines aiming at the development of the competences necessary to the inter and transdisciplinary work of future professionals
- **Ensure the education of professionals with critical spirit and willingness for change**. The professional in the education area needs to follow the constant changes of social demand, know how to adopt differentiated attitudes towards his students and face the challenges with flexibility and dynamism, assuring his effective actuation in the efficient compliance of his role in social context (my emphasis, UFES-DLL: 2006, p. 8).
Furthermore, it is stated that “it is necessary to expand the concept of curriculum, which should be conceived as cultural construction that provides the knowledge acquisition in an articulated way” (UFES-DLL: 2006, p. 10). This means providing flexibility in the organization of the course, and awareness on diversity and heterogeneity of the student’s knowledge. Thus, we see that the PPP focuses on many of the characteristics that I have been calling critical, i.e., the encouragement for content contextualization, inter and transdisciplinarity, citizenship, as well as “the education of professionals with critical thinking”. The project aims at stimulating the knowledge of different cultures of English language, strengthening the bonds of human solidarity and reciprocal tolerance, in which social life is settled. Nevertheless, a brief analysis of the practices enables us to make some interpretations, for example, that the PPP is a relatively recent document (2006) which presents interesting interdisciplinary proposals (for instance, the discipline Topics and Projects). However, in practice, this interdisciplinarity does not work, once, with rare exceptions, there is no dialogue between the professors and the departments involved.

The curricular disciplines of qualification in English are mostly focused on language acquisition in deeper levels, which shows a predominantly structuralist perspective. The disciplines Morphosyntax, Phonetics and phonology, Prosody, Semantics, Textual genres, Academic writing, Applied linguistics (as cognition/acquisition or as pragmatics only) are some examples of this perspective. With regard to the literature disciplines, we can see the sovereign presence of American and British literatures, as well as American and British studies. Therefore, although it is an excellent curriculum that seems to be good enough provided that students start the course with a high language level and leave it even more fluent, the practices which are more formative (sociocultural and critical ones) depend tremendously on the individual work of some professors. How to achieve a work in which the critical is considered in this context? Going back to the initial questions of this article, should the critical be problematized or should we abandon it?

I have advocated in other papers (FERRAZ, 2010a, 2012) that the area of Foreign language teaching and learning in public and private universities has decreased exponentially. In some cases, such as Universidade de Mogi das Cruzes and Universidade Brás Cubas, the Foreign Language courses have been extinguished after
three decades of existence. Although I am aware that the reduction and lack of interest in becoming a teacher in Brazil has to do with several factors (shortage of structure and financial recognition, lack of prestige and valorization of teaching in the public school, etc.), I understand that one of the factors for this lack of interest may be connected to the necessity of reviewing what teaching and learning a foreign/additional language means in contemporary times. There are countless examples which can prove that young people today belong to a generation which is very different from the one from three decades ago, in other words, it seems to me that teaching solely the language is not enough, once these young people have access to this language (vocabulary input, repetition) through thousands of free learning websites, if they want. Thus, I think that a meaningful language teaching involves the development of criticality, citizenship and social justice by means of linguistic practices (vocabulary, grammatical, multimodal, critical); it is in/through learning English that we enter these three domains aforementioned.

Acting in the gaps of the curriculum is one of Duboc’s proposal (2012, 2014a) and it may lead to disruption and meaning making processes. In one of the disciplines I teach, English Language: Writing Communication and Academic Text, I have developed a project called Meaningful and Real writing, inspired by the idea that the students should not be read just by their professors, who will read the final papers and then probably shelve them until throwing them away one day. Hence, the project, not only dealt with themes of contextual research, chosen by the students or brought by the professor, but also aimed at making academic writing meaningful and real. For this, the students were invited to write an academic article in English to be published (if the content were suitable for publication) in a book that was being organized by two professors from the department. In the middle of the process, everybody presented their research projects. At the end, they all discussed the papers orally with a board of invited professors, who together with the professor/advisor, read and evaluated all the papers. The results of the project were encouraging, once 10 out of 16 students in the group were invited to publish in the book. These are some of the research papers developed by the students:

- *Keep calm, carry on, and let God save the Queen: Multiliteracies and British Pop Culture* (paper about multiliteracies for English Language adolescent learners);
• *Female presence in the Brazilian heavy metal scene* (research with feminist bases about bands formed only by women. It was investigated how they use the English language and other aspects);

• *Canadians beliefs about their own cultural aspects: Canada is not (just) the backyard of the United States* (paper problematizing the meaning of being a Canadian from the Canadian point of view);

• *The importance of Language and Culture for English teachers and students* (research about language, culture and education from the viewpoint of Foreign Languages – UFES students);

• *Students´ realities in public schools* (investigation about EL teaching in a public state school in Espírito Santo);

• *Music, language and tradition: An analysis based on a Gaelic folk song* (paper about the folklore, the music and the literature in Gaelic culture).

The students’ disruption process occurred as they got to believe that they would be able to carry out a relevant research and that this research, as I have reinforced, would not be “shelved” by the professor/advisor, but would be read by him and by other professors, besides being appreciated for publication. It is worth pointing out that all the 16 students decided to participate and all of them carried out their research. The meaning making process took place in several ways: during the orientation process the choices and possibilities of topics were respected, in other words, the student did not have to research the professor’s topics and they were all encouraged to make their own interpretations and analysis of their data or study goals.

The second example refers to teacher education, thinking about our local context (Vitória city, Espírito Santo, Brazil). According to Rajagopalan’s views (2006), “the theories in global terms, i.e. without worrying about the local specificities contribute little or not at all to solve problems faced in real life.” (RAJAGOPALAN: 2006, p. 163-164). The project was developed with the students of the first year and it is about a case study of the Brazilian company Petrobrás. As we will see, this company is part of the students’ real life in Vitória (ES), either because their relatives work there, or due to their desire to become English teachers for the staff of this renowned national company. The objectives of the activity were suspending and promoting the construction of their own meanings towards the views about Petrobrás. This activity was proposed by means of a collaborative work, local discussion, criticality and multimodality. The students were invited to research on the company Petrobrás having in mind different viewpoints; in groups, they were divided into committees (ES government, federal government,
multinational companies, Petrobrás, UFES, “capixabas”, Greenpeace) and prepared themselves to debate about oil exploration in Espírito Santo. At the end, they created a poster (photographs below) and presented their proposals (real ones) in an oral and visual way. For the debate, each group asked questions to the committees. I highlight that the whole activity was carried out in English, by both parts, professor and students. Below are some examples of the students’ production.

Image 4 – Classroom picture

Image 5 – Classroom picture

The group which produced the project of Picture 4 represented the company Petrobrás and presented a sustainable development plan while the group of Picture 5 represented the local community. This group, as we can see, claimed the return of the oil exploration royalties to the city of Vitória. I highlight the multimodal aspects of this project: digitality (online research), image production (visual literacy), collective meaning making, oral presentation of ideas and visual and oral debate. We can understand the Multiliteracies (ML) pedagogy as a pedagogy that “goes beyond” when compared to the traditional pedagogies (chalk and talk, for example). According to Rojo’s views (2012, p. 23), some of the essential characteristics of ML pedagogy are: “interactive and, more than that, collaborative; they are hybrid, cross-border, half-caste (of languages, modes, media and cultures)”. I interpret this activity as promoter of criticality through meaning making performed by the students, through the disruptions coming from the information brought and through the heated debates. Furthermore, the students promoted the suspicion of the discourses that ran in the mass media in relation to the events occurred in the company at that time.

Finally, I believe that this critical work can and should also take place via orientations for final term papers (in order to graduate, students are required to produce
a final paper). Luis Felipe was one of our undergrad students and arrived at our university pretty quiet and shy. At the end of the course, his decision to research on Queer studies through linguistic landscapes (SHOHAMY, 2009) was a disruption for both the supervisor and himself. His constructions and interpretations of the photographs about the demonstrations against homophobia and about queerness, spread throughout the university campus, showed the wish to say something important, as well as the wish to be heard and respected for his sexual orientation:

![Image 6 - Queer Linguistic Landscapes against Heternormativity](image)

4. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Should we, therefore, abandon the term critical or keep on problematizing it? In local contexts, is there still the need for criticality? I believe these questionings impact all of us, as they make us question several of our practices, not only as English language teachers, but mainly as educators: what do our students take away when leaving the classroom? What do they actually learn? Should we seek solely for linguistic proficiency or we can teach more than that? This latter question is the core of our studies.

In this article, I aimed at problematizing three concepts of critique according to Monte Mór’s and Ricoeur’s views. I am suggesting that it is not only about defining the term; it has to do with an attitude and an epistemological matter. The

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critique as suspension and suspicion of truths, as disruption and meaning making seems to be of greatest necessity in times of reviews of language policies and of the roles of foreign/additional language education in our country. The two activities and the term paper analyzed reveal pedagogical practices which focus on students’ contexts, providing opportunities for them to rethink FL learning and promote a more flexible view.

Ultimately, the last sense of critique that I discuss here is the one connected to acquisition. This is a common critical sense that can be translated as ‘reaching critique’, ‘achieving a level of critically’, ‘getting there’. Nevertheless this might be the sense we mostly hear of, I think it should be rethought for it maintains the positivist idea that critique equals accumulation. In this sense, critique is not necessarily in the encyclopedias, as it is not about knowledge memorization and accumulation; it is not on the Facebook postings, which is trusted by many as knowledge source (and not as flow of information, advertisement and privacy). As we have seen, mass media and social networks are just apparently democratic, and of free access. The critique I am sustaining here is not fragmented, reified and true knowledge. Perhaps this critical sense is thus in the simplicity, humbleness and humanity (or in the condition of “being” according to Souza-Santos), and in the share of the sensitive (from Racière’s): being critical in contemporary times means fighting against social injustices through education, claiming our active and participatory citizenship, thinking about “going beyond” to visit the other and come out transformed.

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