Laptops are open and everyone’s online and chattering away at the same time. I pass around a yellow pad and it circulates from one person to the next, in zigzag order, for the length of the seminar. The participants are writing an ongoing serial collaboration and will continue to work on this, during the class, for the full fourteen weeks we meet. Each week one student takes the pages home and posts a verbatim transcription and an edited version. From my laptop I project, on the large LCD display screen, the index of the class listserv, to which everyone has posted their work for the week.

Each week students write works based on the experiments list (http://writing.upenn.edu/bernstein/experiments.html), a set of constraints and procedures, which has served as a foundation for much of my undergraduate teaching over the past twenty years. You could call this class ‘creative writing’, but I resist the label since it comes with all the weight of the prototypical poetry workshop, which is often focused on content-based exercises rather than experiments in form. Write a poem about the first time you saw your Dad shaving: ‘the blood dripped down his face / and I trembled in the corner, / unseen, whimpering’. Not being particularly interested in sincerity, description, or traditional craft, I’ve long made a point of teaching modernist and contemporary poetry classes rather than writing classes, but the twist is that these literature classes – what I call ‘creative (w)reading’ workshops – are run as if they were creative writing classes (students write creatively in response to the readings, but the focus is entirely on poems assigned).

Over time, you see, I’ve become more interested in small seminars devoted just to the students’ experiments and so, through a kind of trap
back door, which I’ve fallen through, tripping up my apparent prejudices, I’ve ended up in a very common space of creative writing (poetry), which I simply call ‘Writing Experiments Seminar’ – or English 111, after the number of the room in which we meet.

My phobia of creative writing poetry workshops, like all phobias, is exaggerated and no doubt unfair to the eccentric range offered under the rubric; but I cling to it as an untrustworthy friend. But then again I know what I don’t like. I am so stubborn that I am sure if someone advised me on how to improve a poem I’d probably do the opposite, just out of sheer contrariness. From the get-go I tell 111 participants that writing good poems, or learning to write better poems, or learning the craft of poetry, or improving your work, is not the focus or goal of the seminar (but it may happen as a by-product). I think of 111 as a non-expository writing class, or a course in anti- or para- or pluri-composition, something, if I had my way (and not just a book by that name), I would require as an antidote to Freshman Comp. The class has its value not for budding poets, only, or primarily, or exclusively, but also for all writers. It’s less a workshop than a lab, with experiments in mutant forms conducted on the textual body of the living language. (I play the role of a kinder, gentler Frankenstein.) Still, as an elective course, the students who enrol in it think of the class as a poetry class, since that is the only academic slot associated with what one of the students likes to call abnormal writing, but I prefer to think of as r&d (research and development). I figure the more you know how to take words apart and put them together, the more aspects of language you’ve turned up, down, left, right, inside out, and outside in, the better you will be able to respond to the many contingencies, screw balls and curve balls, and monkey wrenches that language will inevitably throw your way. Like my main man says, Whose in control, me or the words? (Whose is, that’s who.) And then – I am slowly getting around to the subject of teaching modernist poetry – an approach like this makes for pro-active readers by potentiating pro-active approaches to writing. So, yeah, busted again: this is just another kind of lit’r’ture class, a reading workshop not so much in disguise as in drag.

Let me circle back to the question of craft and improvement. The scene: my grossly caricatured creative writing workshop, led by a teacher who (unlike me) knows good from bad and (also unlike me) prefers the good. A teacher who’s not afraid to tell a student what she’s doing wrong and how to fix it. I have my tastes too but am wary of legislating them, since I know they are minority tastes, particular and eccentric tastes, and I don’t expect students to share them, much less adopt them. I try as much as