The intellect is characterised by a natural inability to comprehend life.
Bergson, *Creative Evolution* 174

In chapter two, I argued for the presence of a Formalist, more specifically a Shklovskyite, influence within Nabokov’s work. In the course of my discussion I suggested that Nabokov engaged with what I have characterized as Shklovsky’s implicit preoccupation with perception and misperception, with the latter’s contention that the mind does not apprehend the world as it really is. Equally resonant for Nabokov was the idea that art may strip away the film that obscures reality. We shall see that Nabokov’s deluded artist figures often provide us with an ironic inversion of this model.

I now wish to examine the nature and extent of Nabokov’s Bergsonian affinities. It is well known that Nabokov was a Bergson enthusiast. He had been intensely stimulated by Bergson’s philosophy, especially during his European émigré phase, and in *Strong Opinions*, he designates the philosopher one of his “favourites.”¹ Russian Formalism and Bergsonism share some common features. This is perhaps not surprising given that in the first two decades of the twentieth century Bergson enjoyed international renown with his works being widely discussed throughout Europe and America. The Russian avant-garde were, moreover, highly attuned to intellectual and artistic developments in France. James Curtis has suggested that the Formalists manifested a Bergsonian influence in their preoccupation with the automatization of perception.² Curtis might also have mentioned the predilection that both Bergson and Shklovsky evince for difficulty. We have seen earlier that both Shklovsky and Nabokov viewed as salutary a literary art that
made demands upon the reader. Bergson also asserted the value of difficulty, of mental exertion, stating, “I repudiate facility. I recommend a certain manner of thinking which courts difficulty. I value effort above everything.” Curtis does not address an area of potential conflict: Bergson’s essentialist philosophy privileged the individual creative consciousness whereas Formalism appeared to denigrate it. However, as I have argued earlier, Shklovsky’s theorizing itself actually manifests a fundamental concern with individual consciousness and is, in some respects at least, perhaps closer to Bergsonism than first appears. There are other important points of convergence. Bergson and the Formalists manifest an aversion toward a symbolist apprehension of reality whereby a thing is apprehended not in its concrete individuality but as an analogue of something else. They share a fundamental sense of the mind as deluded, as prone to automatism, and a concomitant belief that art may allow access to reality. Bergsonism and Formalism also vindicate the objective existence of a material world that is worthy of the closest scrutiny. In my view, the two doctrines combined to influence Nabokov. For Shklovsky, misperception of reality is caused by automatization and Bergson too believes that the mind under the governance of “intellect” has a tendency toward such an automatised state. Whereas Shklovsky’s theory of automatization and estrangement appears to have been an almost inadvertent vindication of mind, Bergsonism constituted an explicit and purposive argument for the centrality of the individual consciousness. An avid reader of Bergson, Nabokov can be seen broadly to subscribe to an essentialist, anti-mechanistic belief system. It is important to recognize here that Nabokov was a novelist rather than a professional philosopher and I do not claim that he ever expounded a wholly consistent, definitively formulated philosophy. As a creative artist there was no requirement that his ideas be in strict conformity with any school of thought. The idea of such conformity would have been anathema to Nabokov, and an artist is presumably at perfect liberty creatively to deform or subvert any intellectual system. I am concerned firstly to demonstrate that, in a broad sense, Nabokov’s and Bergson’s intellectual frameworks were contiguous. Secondly, my reading of Bergson’s philosophy brings into relief those specific concerns that are central to Nabokov’s own work. Therefore I focus on Bergson’s engagement with delusion, with his notion of the automatized mind that does not apprehend reality. I examine his conception of art as a counter to automatism as well as his suspicion of a symbolist epistemology that effaces material reality.

D.R. Oldroyd’s characterization of Bergson’s work as “a dusty occupant of the lumber room” is not entirely accurate. Works such as Bergson and