Still, it must be borne in mind that unless an apparition had been scientifically observed as we two independent witnesses observed this one, the grounds for believing in its existence would have been next to none. And even after the clear evidence which we obtained of its immaterial nature, we yet remain entirely in the dark as to its objective reality, and we have not the faintest reason for believing it to have been a genuine unadulterated ghost. At the best we can only say that we saw and heard Something, and that this Something differed very widely from almost any other object we had ever seen and heard before. To leap at the conclusion that the Something was therefore a ghost, would be, I venture humbly to submit, without offence to the Psychical Research Society, a most unscientific and illogical specimen of that peculiar fallacy known as Begging the Question.

—“Our Scientific Observations on a Ghost,” Grant Allen¹

Do you not think that there are things which you cannot understand, and yet which are; that some people see things that others cannot? But there are things old and new which must not be contemplated by men's eyes, because they know—or think they know—some things which other men have told them. Ah, it is the fault of our science that it wants to explain all; and if it explains not, then it says there is nothing to explain.

—Dracula (1897), Bram Stoker²

In this paper I investigate the relationship between literary imagination and scientific investigations of the supernatural in the context of the rise of scientific naturalism and popular religious revival in Victorian Britain.³ I analyse supernatural stories by Bram Stoker (1847–1912),

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Grant Allen (1848–1899) and Arthur Conan Doyle (1859–1930) and argue that they can be read as an expression and discussion of the epistemological difficulties encountered in scientific research on spiritual phenomena. The choice of Allen, Doyle, and Stoker is not arbitrary. All three had scientific backgrounds. Allen was a popular science author with the aspiration of becoming a scientist yet he never fulfilled his dream;⁴ Stoker studied mathematics at Trinity College, Dublin;⁵ and Doyle received M.B. and MD degrees from Edinburgh University and had been a practicing ophthalmologist before becoming a full time writer.⁶

Their attitudes towards scientific naturalism and Spiritualism differed from each other, but Allen, Doyle, and Stoker were all interested in the occult. Doyle was an outspoken supporter of Spiritualism and had composed unabashedly apologist writings in defence of spirit photography.⁷ Allen was a popularizer of Darwin’s theory of evolution. He had recourse to Herbert Spencer’s evolutionary philosophy to provide naturalistic accounts of the origins of religious sentiments and aesthetic feelings.⁸ But Allen was also interested in the occult and had attended, with the biologist Edwin Ray Lankester, the businessman Andrew Carnegie and the writers Edmund Gosse and Oscar Wilde, the telepathic performance of the famous thought-reader Stewart Cumberland.⁹ Although Stoker was not directly associated with Spiritualism, supernatural stories occupied a large proportion of his œuvre. He was interested in folklore

⁶ See the entry on Arthur Conan Doyle in Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (DNB).