The first part of the title of this article is borrowed from Judith Butler’s celebrated essay, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, published in 1990, in which she argues that “gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing.”¹ Her point is to prove the “utterly constructed status” of the heterosexual norm, which turns out to be “a parody of the idea of the natural and the original”.² According to Butler, the “unity of gender is the effect of a regulatory practice that seeks to render gender identity uniform through a compulsory heterosexuality”.³ She understands Beauvoir’s famous claim that “one is not born, but rather becomes a woman”, meaning that “woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end”.⁴ Genders, she further continues, “can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity”.⁵

This conception of sex and gender identity as cultural, social and historical variable constructs, liable to be parodied and exposed, bears a striking resemblance to those views of national identity as being equally fictional and constructed, expounded for example in Benedict Anderson’s seminal study, *Imagined Communities*, often referred to by critics and historians of Irish culture.⁶ In his Introduction,

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⁴ *Ibid.*, 33 (Butler’s emphasis).
Anderson indeed argues that nationality, and nationalism, are nothing but cultural artefacts, the rise and development of which can be traced through history.

Much attention has been paid to the constructed nature of national Irish identity as reflected through culture and literature, and reciprocally to the subversive exposure of that fictional nature in a number of writings. The modern Irish novel, for instance, has very convincingly been interpreted as a continuing form of resistance to the deceptive, fabricated beliefs passing off as truths that have sustained and nourished the nationalist discourse of the Irish state since independence.\(^7\) Some of the most outstanding works published in the 1970s and 1980s were thus dedicated to an exploration of the failures of the long-lasting Fianna Fail era and meant to debunk some of its most cherished myths, providing a grim picture of a country ridden by poverty, unemployment, emigration, cultural backwardness, sexual repression and political corruption. But perhaps these novels, however virulent they may have been in their desire to replace deceptive beliefs and false icons by truthful accounts of what Dermot Bolger called “the new Island”,\(^8\) were less perceptive in another area. They were slow in their recognition that a large part of the ideology they were striving to undermine also relied on the imposition on Irish society of what Adrienne Rich defined (and she was the first critic to do so) as “compulsory heterosexuality”.\(^9\) In Ireland “compulsory heterosexuality” was enforced through the severe repression of any sort of sexual behaviour presented as deviant or morally unacceptable, as well as the carefully wrought definitions of strictly defined gender roles. Nationality and gender were the two pillars on which the myth of an essential, natural condition of “Irishness” relied and from which no citizen could be allowed to stray.

The State that emerged after independence was in fact as adamant to define the citizens as intrinsically “Irish” and “Catholic” as to restrict the notion of “woman” to a very narrow frame of meaning.

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8 See Raven Arts Press Pamphlets, such as *Invisible Cities: The New Dubliners*, Dublin: Raven Arts Press, 1988.