For the past few months I have been haunted by an image. It’s an engraving reproduced in In Ruins: A Journey through History, Art and Literature, by Christopher Woodward. Here’s what Woodward has to say about it:

Blackened shells of buildings rise at the marshy edge of a slow and reedy river, one façade advertising ‘COMMERCIAL WHARF’. This is London – or, rather, its future as imagined by the artist Gustave Dore in 1873. The wizard-like figure in Dore’s engraving is a traveller from New Zealand, for to many Victorians this young colony seemed to represent the dominant civilisation of the future. He sits on a broken arch of London Bridge to sketch the ruins of St Paul’s, exactly as Victorian Englishmen sketched those of ancient Rome. The cathedral-like ruin next to the commercial warehouse is Cannon Street Station, brand-new in 1873 but here imagined with the cast-iron piers of the bridge rusting away in the tidal ooze. (Woodward, 1–2)

What haunts me is not only the engraving itself but Woodward’s notion that ‘to many Victorians this young colony seemed to represent the dominant civilisation of the future’.

What happened?

***

Whakarongo aku au, ki te tangi a te manu nei a te ma tui, tui, tuituia! Tuia i runga, tuia i raro, tuia i roto tuia i waho, tuia i te here tangata ka rongo te Ao, ka rongo te Po! Tuia i te kawae tangata ka heke mai ki Hawaiki nui, Hawaiki roa, Hawaiki pamamao, ki te hono i wairua, ki te Whai Ao, ki te Ao Marama! Tihei mauriora!
The State of the Nation's Narratives

My name is Witi Ihimaera; I am a Māori New Zealander. The title of this chapter is the somewhat high-sounding ‘The State of the Nation’s Narratives’. I focus primarily on these shaky islands and Australia across the ditch.

Nau mai, haramai, kua tae mai, welcome.

First of all, I want to acknowledge what distinguished New Zealand novelist and poet, C. K. Stead, says about the aesthetic imperative of literature in his book, Answering to the Language: Essays on Modern Writers, and I quote:

...the writer's first and last responsibility is to the language, word by word, phrase by phrase, sentence by sentence – to the sense, to the sound, to the sound-and-sense in orchestration. (Stead, 12)

In New Zealand our best writers have held to that responsibility: Katherine Mansfield, Janet Frame, Patricia Grace and among our new generation of writers, Eleanor Catton; poets Allen Curnow, Ruth Dallas and the other Ruth Gilbert, Bill Manhire and Robert Sullivan; filmmakers like Vincent Ward, Merata Mita and Niki Caro. I'm sure my Australian colleagues can come up with their list of wordsmiths and imagists like Miles Franklin, Patrick White, Peter Carey, Shirley Hazzard, Murray Bail, and for entirely different linguistic reasons, Les Murray; among filmmakers Fred Schepisi, Bruce Beresford and Baz Luhrmann; and David Williamson must be one of the top playwrights in the world today. This chapter, however, is concerned with literature's other, political, imperative, the writer's responsibility to what Tom Beckett, in his interview with Charles Bernstein, reproduced in Content's Dream; Essays 1975–1984, called:

...the matrix of social and historical relations that are more significant to the individual text than any personal qualities of life or voice of an author. (Bernstein, 408)

In other words, the writer's role in showing that matrix, to itself: its successes, its failures, its nightmares, and all of its peoples' dreams. In particular, I shall be asking the question: ‘Why haven't we, and I am including Australia in the question, become that dominant nation referenced by Christopher Woodward...as far as our narratives are concerned?’

***

My perspective on this question is concerned with whether or not you consider that our ancestors, those migrants who populated Australia