

Paradise Lost on Earth and Among Twigs

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Рай: paradise

Gooooood morning, Moscow! You're listening to Radio TMT, and it's time for the weather report. Looks like it's going to be another beautiful day: temps in the 30s, clear blue skies and humidity at 33 percent. It's another day in paradise!

Wait a minute ... How come weather that would be heavenly in New York or London is hellish in Moscow? As we pause to ponder yet another mystery of Russian life, this is a good opportunity to consider Russian notions of heaven and hell.

Рай is paradise or heaven in the hereafter. If you want to describe a place that is indescribably beautiful here and now, call it рай земной (paradise on earth). Before the drought, some friends invited me out to their dacha: Приезжайте летом, когда у нас участок — рай земной (Come out in the summer when our yard is heaven on earth). Now their scorched plot is more like потерянный рай (paradise lost), which — grim joking aside — is a time or place of great happiness or beauty that is now gone. This is often one's childhood, seen through the

rosy glasses of memory: Человек начинает воспринимать своё детство как некий потерянный рай (A person begins to perceive his childhood as a kind of paradise lost).

At my dacha community there is a pair of newlyweds who are totally oblivious to the raging heat and our daily power, water and cell phone outages. In cases like this, you can say: С милым рай и в шалаше! (Love makes a cottage a castle; literally, “with your sweetheart it’s paradise even in a shelter of twigs.”) Another divine expression is въехать в рай на чужом горбу. Here горб (a hump) stands for a person’s back and back-breaking labor. The idea is that someone wants to reap the benefits (въехать в рай — enter heaven) of someone’s labor (на чужом горбу — on someone else’s back). This is something like a piggy-back ride with the rider hogging all the glory.

Ад is heaven’s opposite: hell, the underworld in the hereafter. In the here and now, ад and its derivatives адский and адов (hellish, infernal) are used to describe anything blazingly hot, painful or unbearable, like адская жара (unbearable heat). Or as someone whined on a blog: Выключи уже, пожалуйста, это адово пекло! Сил нет терпеть! (Please turn off this infernal furnace already! I can’t take it anymore!) In cases like this, you need адово терпение (literally, “hellish patience”). This is actually infinite patience, which you’d think would be heaven sent, not the devil’s work. Perhaps it’s the infinite patience required to endure eternity in hell, or what seems like an eternity of hellish weather.

And then there’s the puzzling ад кромешный. Кромешный is the adjectival form of кром, a now archaic word that means border or edge. Ад кромешный is something like the outskirts of hell — unbearable conditions or pandemonium. These days it can be used to describe the metro: deep underground pits of fiery heat, tortured souls, noise and chaos. They ought to put up a sign at the entrance: “Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.”

Cheer up! Instead of descending into the pit of pandemonium, we can use another hellish Russian expression and fly to Tartarus. Тартарары is the Russian version of Tartarus, the underworld of Greek mythology, and провалиться or лететь в тартарары is what we Americans call going to hell in a hand basket.

That’s what our utilities are doing, and I don’t blame them at all.

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