Our picture of Gauss, as it has come down to us from the years between 1838 and 1855, is even paler than that from the preceding era. There are now several eyewitness reports from students and visitors, but even they do not contribute much.¹ Most of the letters from this period were to Schumacher, now by far his most frequent correspondent, but they stay on the surface, projecting the picture of a perpetually busy man with many diverse interests, most of them apparently not very inspired. Gauss was still quite active in his astronomical and magnetic observatories, but there were many other occupations. There were elementary mathematical problems, among them combinatorial ones posed by Schumacher,² experimental and theoretical physics, and once more foreign languages.

There are quite a few surprises even in the Schumacher correspondence which show us Gauss in an unexpected new light. In a letter of December 1824 (#228a of Dec. 23), he pleads with Schumacher not to dismiss his young assistant Klausen even though he was clumsy and had dropped a precious barometer. Gauss asks Schumacher to be tolerant and writes

I hope you will accept him again but I am concerned about his future. The incident with the barometer may not have been the first of its kind and lets me believe that he is not skillful enough to be a practical astronomer. This and teaching, however, are currently the only ways which allow a mathematician without means of his own to earn his living. Only if he were to produce something exceptionally good could he hope to find a position at an academy, the way they are organized today, and even then you could bet 99 to 1 that he would not get it. I do not know whether he could ever be a professor; you are the better judge. If you think he would also not be suitable for this then he would perhaps do best to go into a different profession, he could join the army or do something else where he could use his spare time for mathematics. If one has to work for one’s living it does not matter whether one teaches beginners or works as a cobbler. The only thing that counts is what would leave a maximum of free time . . .³

W. K. Bühler, *Gauss*  
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This passage is typical for Gauss’s attitude during the last 30 or 40 years of his life. He strove to be mild and understanding and though he could not always maintain it, this seemed to be a genuine expression of the way he saw things during this period.

In the early 1840s, Gauss took up Russian after a short flirt with Sanskrit, which he did not find very congenial. He maintained his interest in English literature; a triumph, immediately reported to Schumacher, was the identification and correction of the sentence “The moon rises broadly in the northwest” in one of the novels of the much loved Walter Scott. Gauss’s concern for details should not come as a surprise. He had an indefatigable interest in factual information whether it was important or not. We recognize a related trait in his mathematical investigations: they were always inductive, proceeding from particular facts to general statements and avoiding unnecessary abstraction. It was this which led him to disregard any algebraic notions in *Disqu. Arithm.*, though he developed them in the course of the exposition and only stopped short of defining them explicitly. So far, we have stressed in this biography the mathematical character of Gauss’s work in the natural sciences, but one should not overlook the “scientific”, often experimental character of his mathematical work. Gauss’s thinking was inductive to an extraordinary degree, hence his hunger for facts, his love of details, be it in mathematics, in the natural sciences, or in any other sector of his intellectual life. This is the light in which we have to see his untiring discussions of astronomical or geodetic measurements and his experiments on behalf of the Hanoverian commission on weights and measures, as well as his endless computations, his interest in tables of prime factors, or his computational determination of one of the periods of the lemniscate.

In 1842, though Gauss had not spent a single night out of his house for over ten years, he entered into negotiations with Vienna, where a position at the university had been offered; if his Berlin negotiations, 20 years earlier, had not been very purposeful, the short negotiations with Vienna were even less so and broke off quickly. The years following Weber’s departure were deeply unhappy. Gauss was spared the extreme humiliation which often accompanies old age, but it would be deceptive to try to project the picture of a serene evening in a productive and fruitful life. The loss of Weber in early 1838, who in so many respects had been like a son to Gauss, followed the emigration of Wilhelm; shortly before Weber, Minna Ewald and her husband had left Göttingen. In 1839, Gauss’s old mother, now blind, died; her granddaughter Minna followed in 1840, only in her 33rd year. This last loss was very painful—she and Joseph had been the surviving children, the “pledges”, of the first marriage. Minna, her father’s favorite among the children, was said to have resembled her mother closely. Of the friends, the revered Olbers died in 1840,